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What do working German women have that Canadians don't? Lots of help from above [1]

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EXCERPTS

When it came to women and the work place, Canada used to be the world's model. A dozen years ago, when Germany began to notice that it had an expensive and embarrassing problem of a surprisingly small proportion of women who were able to enter the labour force, its officials looked to Canada for inspiration.

In 2005, women in Canada seemed unstoppable: The percentage of Canadian women active in the work force (though not necessarily employed) had soared from barely a fifth in the 1950s to nearly 80 per cent, about 10 points below the male rate, and they seemed headed toward equality. Germany, by comparison, despite having just elected its first female chancellor, was stuck in a previous century. At that time, only about 6 in 10 adult German women were even considering employment, a rate that hadn't risen since the mid-1990s (and was far below the rate for men). The Canadians, it seemed, must be doing something right.

And then something went wrong.

[See graph image online. Info graphic shows the employment rate for women aged 15-64 every year from 2000-present in both Canada and Germany. While Canada begins with a higher rate (65.6%) than Germany's (57.7%), Germany's figures matches Canada's by the year 2014, while Canada's grow incrementally.]

In Canada, the progress of women into working life simply halted. Around 2007, the percentage of women in the labour force stopped growing, and has remained stalled for a decade, at about eight percentage points below the rate for men, even falling slightly during some recent years.

Now, it seems, Canada might learn some lessons from Germany. During the past dozen years, the employment rate of women in Germany has soared to Canadian levels, and in fact is likely to overtake the Canadian rate. Germany is far from a utopia of workplace equality – there's plenty of discrimination in pay, hiring and boardroom representation, and it still has a larger gap between female and male employment levels than Canada does – but that gap has become a third smaller over the past decade, while Canada's hasn't improved at all.

What do German women have at work that Canadians don't? Spend some time among women who've returned to work in Frankfurt, and one answer becomes apparent: A lot of help from above.

Just ask Véronique Schäfer. But don't ask her in the morning. Her weekdays start in the sort of blur known to most working mothers: Up at 6:30 a.m., wakes her daughters, first the 11-year-old and then the seven-year-old, has a few words with her husband as he heads off to his job at Samsung, makes breakfast, sends the girls off to school at 7:30, and at 8:15 heads out to her office in downtown Frankfurt.

Once at her desk, Ms. Schäfer can breathe: she is back in her element, after more than a decade away. She finds this job, in the sales department at a company that makes gaskets and seals for the chemical industry, as rewarding as the succession of positions she held before 2006. That career path, in which her degree in business administration led to positions in companies in France, southern Germany and Canada, was abruptly interrupted when the pressures of a new family, and the inflexible demands of corporate life, forced her out of the workplace.

Getting back into full-time work took years longer than Ms. Schäfer, 43, expected it would. In the end, what it took was a set of creative interventions from a government that badly wanted her, and millions of others in her position, back on the job.

A decade ago, it became apparent to many German officials (including Angela Merkel, then beginning her 12-year term) that this gap was not only aggravating to millions of women, it was costing the country severely in wasted talent and lost productivity – and, as the working-age population of Germany plummets, this waste would become unaffordable.

So Germany embarked on a large scale program, nationally and across its 16 state governments, designed to equalize the percentage of women and men in the work force.

Today, it's hard to find another country that is doing as many things – some good things, some questionable or halfhearted things, some novel and experimental things – to try to make it better.

The innovative nature of Ms. Schafer's new job only becomes apparent after lunch. She has a final meeting with her colleagues, and then ends her working day at 2 p.m. Hers is a full-time job, but one with reduced office hours – one of those novel interventions that made it possible for her to work. She leaves the office and picks her kids up from their subsidized after-school childcare – itself another of those innovations (in Frankfurt, as in many parts of western Germany, the school day still ends at 1 p.m.), spends the afternoon helping them with homework and completing her own work, and sends them off to bed at 8:30.

"When I started trying to get back to work five years ago, it was really discouraging and I gave up – I really lost self-confidence because so few companies wanted to offer hours that could accommodate my life," she says during an afternoon visit to the government-funded "reintegration" institute that helped her find this position.

"When I got this job last year I thought – finally! A way to work half hours at a serious job. What changed, during the last five years, is that now there is this whole network of assistance."

Germany, despite its booming economy, was traditionally one of the tougher countries for working mothers. Not only is school often only half-day and skilled part-time work rare, but the country's lingering macho culture has long discouraged and belittled women who have both jobs and families (they are still sometimes denounced in media and politics as rabenmutter – "raven-mothers" who supposedly abuse their chicks by throwing them from the nest). As a result, Germany, despite some of the world's lowest unemployment rates, has had a very wide gap between levels of male and female employment.

That gap has narrowed in part because there's been a change in German public attitudes toward women in the workplace. But politics have played a part in this change: There was a dawning realization, in both Ms. Merkel's conservative Christian Democratic political party and its centre-left opposition, that the economic cost of those backward attitudes was too steep, and policies were needed in order to change realities and attitudes.

"We've had a change of attitudes in Germany – we no longer see women as dependent on their husbands – but we've also had a big change in demographics, and a realization that we're not going to be able to find skilled employees if women aren't able to find ways to work," says Anke Paul, the head of equal opportunity at the ministry of labour in Hessen, the German state that includes Frankfurt.

Ms. Paul was responsible for launching or financing the set of institutions, including "women's offices" scattered across her state and the re-integration centre that helped connect Véronique Schäfer with her job.

There's a widespread agreement among informed observers that Canada isn't going to make any more progress until it starts taking the female employment rate as seriously as the Germans have. Canada's rate is high – but a new generation of Canadian women are realizing that it's not anywhere near as high as it could be, for reasons that would have been familiar to Ms. Schäfer a couple of years ago.

"A lot of younger women in Canada, in their 20s and 30s, are running into limits," says Frances Woolley, a Carleton University professor who specializes in the economies of families and gender. "We've seen a cohort of women grow up in Canada who have not experienced the struggle to get out of the home and into the work force – instead, they've experienced the barriers and difficulties of balancing work and family, the difficulty of finding child care, the challenges of running a household while working, the gaps in pay between men and women."

Women in Canada, in other words, are working about as much as they can under the limitations of the Canadian system. And that system's limits became increasingly visible after the turn of the century: The amount of free or highly subsidized all-day child care remains extremely limited (except in Quebec). There are few incentives for companies to move women from part-time into full-time employment while maintaining family-friendly hours. The tax system remains more favourable toward one-income families. The pay gap between men and women remains astonishingly large, and there are very large shortages of women in top positions in many skilled industries and professions, creating a "glass ceiling" disincentive to new workers. There are no major incentives to encourage both men and women to take parental leave, a fact that encourages some employers to avoid hiring younger women. And there are few targeted programs designed to put women back into the skilled work force.

Yet there are some looming reasons why Canada might want to improve its female employment rate – beyond the basic ethical fact that women deserve to have the same choices available to them that men do.

According to the Conference Board of Canada, by the end of this decade Canada's employers will face a shortage of nearly a million skilled working-age people (even if current immigration rates don't decrease). Those million positions could be filled by raising immigration rates significantly or by raising the retirement age well above 67. But a large part of that shortage could be filled by the hundreds of thousands of women who are staying out of the work force because the system has made it difficult to both work and raise a family. That would require investments and commitments from both government and the private sector. To learn how, it's worth looking at Germany's experiment – and inside the institutions and systems that have been created to address exactly this sort of problem.

It is Thursday afternoon inside a big storefront building on an older industrial block near Frankfurt's central train station, and clusters of women, most in mid-career, fill the hallways. It feels like a somewhat more mature and decidedly more female version of a small community college. But anyone here will tell you that the Frauen-Softwarehaus – "Women-software-house" – is much more about those informal gatherings in the hallways than it is about the skills-upgrading courses it offers.

This place is part of Berlin's "Prospects for Reintegration" program, which was created in 2009 as a government-funded network of institutions to provide women with the resources, contacts and employment environments they need to get back into to the work force –

and also a place for employers, searching for experienced people with skills in Germany's overheated labour market, to find talent.

This is where Véronique Schäfer rebuilt her confidence, upgraded her skills and, most importantly in her eyes, made a network of contacts that led to the job she has today. She connected with a wide circle of women seeking equally custom-made solutions to match their specialized knowledge to a changing workplace.

"This was a way for me to find out what my skills really are, and to decide the best way to put myself back into the economy in a new city," says Meike Joa, 42, who worked in medical organizations and cultural agencies around Europe before her two children were born and her husband's banking job took them to Frankfurt's much more strait-laced economy. She used the program to get secure part-time work, and to develop enough small-business skills to start a photography business – the sort of combination of employment and entrepreneurship that is increasingly popular among Germans.

"The women in our program tend to be well-qualified, but became disconnected from the working world because of family obligations or changes in their lives," says Petra Schimmer, the managing director of the Frau-Softwarehaus, which is a government-funded private agency. "We have recognized such women as a big opportunity for the economy, if they can overcome barriers." The centres often work with employers eager to gain experienced high-skill employees, helping them custom-design work-life packages for mid-career women.

The reintegration centres are a small but fairly unique part of the web of German programs intended to raise the female work-participation rate. But this program involves a number of more prominent elements.

The most visible, and contentious, involves child care – which, most observers agree, is the most significant barrier to getting women into the workplace (especially in a country where half-day school is still the norm for most kids up to age 18).

The Merkel government's 2013 pledge to provide a subsidized child-care space for every child aged one and older has been slow to translate into reality. In fact, in October a federal judge ruled that parents can sue the government for failing to provide child-care spaces, and if successful the government must reimburse them for lost revenue and expenses created by the absence of spaces.

For full-time employed parents, childcare is often required until the kids are partway through high school; this entails a complex system to account for various school and working hours (the hour of child care Ms. Schäfer requires between 1 p.m. and 2 p.m. is part of this system).

Nevertheless, the pledge has led to a huge expansion of childcare facilities and the creation of a booming new economic sector in providing care for children of working couples. And Germany's ultra-tight labour market has led many companies to introduce free childcare (with government support) as a job incentive – in fact, many of the large employers now offer free all-day creches and childcare centres at the workplace.

For Germans, this policy shift marks the end of an old political divide. Free universal childcare has always been available in the formerly Communist states of East Germany (where women were forced to work), including Berlin. But these regions have little economic activity or employment. Here in the west, where Europe's largest economy is centred, child care was previously regarded as unnecessary.

"What we are seeing is a real convergence in attitudes between the formerly very different halves of Germany, and a consensus around child care and employment equality as a important values," says Elke Holst, a specialist in employment and gender at the German Institute for Economic Research in Berlin.

A second key plank in narrowing the gap is a shift toward all-day schooling – something that, even more than child care, has taken a long time to reach a consensus, despite the fact that most analysts agree the length of the school day is the largest single factor explaining Germany's previous levels of inequity.

(This is one area where Canada has little to learn from Germany: Full-day school has been part of life for a century. It also explains a large part of why Canada's male-female employment gap remains narrower than Germany's.)

While there had been a slow expansion of all-day schools after Ms. Merkel took office, what really provoked a change was a series of international test results in the late 2000s which showed Germany's students falling far below Western averages in knowledge and skills – and lower-income kids falling even further. This was widely blamed on Germany's rigid, half-day primary and secondary schools, and the government began to make changes happen.

In 2002, only 10 per cent of German schools stayed open until 3 p.m. By the end of 2015, it was almost 40 per cent, and almost 60 per cent of schools are preparing to open all day in the near future. A study last year by the Bertelsmann Foundation found that parents are more satisfied with the quality of education and service at all-day schools – something that might be obvious in other countries but still seems novel and surprising to many Germans.

Yet a third area, parental leave, shows where European economies could offer lessons to Canada.

At the beginning of 2015, Germany introduced major changes to its child benefit and parental-leave policies, intended to encourage fathers to take the same amount of leave as mothers. "We want to see both parents taking the same amount of time off work, 12 to 14 months each, so women are not seen as taking more months of leave than men," says Ms. Paul, the Hessen employment-equality director.

The intention is to end the reluctance many employers seem to have about hiring young women, out of fear that they will take years of leave. "We want a situation where men are taking the same number of months off, so that employers will have the same attitude about hiring young men as young women – there will not be any special disadvantage to hiring women," said Ms. Paul.

Germany modelled this program after Sweden's successful family-leave program. But unlike Sweden's system, where men are legally

required to take a full year off when they become fathers, the German system offers financial incentives but no legal requirement; some have criticized it as ineffective (since some men will pass up the incentives in order to continue working).

The benefits of these two-partner family-leave programs extend beyond de-stigmatizing the hiring of younger women, though. As Dr. Woolley, the Carleton economist, points out, one of the effects of many of these programs is to change the organization of domestic duties, which often lie at the root of the factors the prevent women from entering full-time work.

“Households tend to set up a way of doing things, and those things don’t tend to change … If dads are involved when the kids are very young, that may affect not just the division of labour when the couple are caring for a baby, but the division of labour for decades ahead – and that may have long-term effects on female labour-force participation.”

This, more than specific policies, is where Germany’s bold but awkward hodgepodge of policies may offer the most important lessons.

For advanced countries like Germany and Canada, where equality is technically well established in the law, the structure of family life, and the ways many couples divide domestic work and parenting, may be the largest remaining barrier to workplace equality.

That is where the German initiative is most interesting: Half of it is designed to allow mothers such as Ms. Schäfer and Ms. Joa to get around the unequal structure of their domestic life and find satisfying work in the spaces between. But much of the rest of it – the changes in school hours, family leave and even the reintegration program itself – reflects, and possibly even catalyzes, deeper changes in family life.

Nobody knows how well the big, expensive German initiatives will succeed (many of these programs are only a few years old). But they mark a slowly dawning realization, one that Canada’s governments have yet to fully catch up on – that meaningful changes at work are going to require some larger changes at home.

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