

The hidden sexism behind Canada's childcare system^[1]

Author: Drimonis, Toula

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EXCERPTS

Some would have you believe, in light of the significant progress that has been achieved over the past few decades, that Canada has effectively achieved true gender equality. There is one area, however, where the playing field remains woefully unequal: childcare. Despite immense legal and social progress, women continue to bear an unequal childcare burden which affects every single aspect of their personal and professional lives.

In her recently published book, *Maternité, la face cachée du sexisme* ("Motherhood, the hidden face of sexism"), Quebec journalist Marilyse Hamelin makes a compelling and well-researched argument: motherhood continues to be a major cause of workplace discrimination, double standards, professional obstacles, guilt trips, exceedingly high expectations, and immense sacrifice for women. They are often the ones who end up relinquishing lucrative careers or personal interests to handle the overwhelming majority of child-rearing tasks. Considering women face pre-existing pay inequity, it's not surprising they're the ones who find themselves precariously below the poverty line in their senior years.

A quick look at childcare expenses across Canada (often the second-largest expense after housing) explains why so many women are the ones who "choose" to opt out of a career, whether permanently or temporarily, and stay home with their kids.

A 2015 report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives revealed that it cost an average of \$1,676 a month for infant childcare in Toronto. For many, that's a full month's salary. Why would someone work full-time only to turn around and pay their entire salary in childcare expenses? One shudders to think of how single parents, the overwhelming majority of whom are women, make ends meet when childcare costs are so high.

Quebec is ahead by leaps and bounds thanks to its universal childcare system, which makes it much more affordable to access daycare. Even with a new sliding fee scale (\$7.30 per day for parents who earn less than \$50,000 per year, rising to \$20 for families that earn more than \$150,000) sending a child off to daycare in Quebec is drastically more affordable than it is in other provinces.

Hamelin attributes the creation of Quebec's system to years of work by social activists, feminists, and the province's unions, who insisted on prioritizing accessible and affordable childcare as a social necessity. Studies have since confirmed that access to affordable childcare has had a tremendous impact on women's labour force participation rates and domestic incomes in Quebec.

This all means very little if women are still stuck with the overwhelming brunt of childrearing (ranging from preparing lunches and dinner, taking the kids to school, homework, scheduling doctor's appointments, etc.), and housework, while having to navigate their way through a demanding work schedule and managers who question their commitment when one of the many balls they are constantly juggling occasionally drops.

While today's men are undoubtedly doing more than in previous generations, it's still not enough. Mothers are stuck with the majority of child-related responsibilities and decisions, resulting in today's working moms being saddled with twice as many tasks as their stay-at-home mothers had, and often while carrying the extra burden of being the primary caretaker for their aging parents. Too many men continue to refer to taking care of their own kids as babysitting, as if they were mere apprentice caretakers, and too many women let them get away with it.

"I have met a lot of brilliant men whose spouses serve their careers and live in their shadows," writes brilliant essayist Rebecca Solnit in a recent piece for the Guardian. "There have been so many women who stayed at home and raised the kids while men went off on adventures and pursued accomplishments. There still are. These straight men with brilliant careers and families - no one asks them how they manage to have it all, because we know: she's how." With more women in the workforce, along with a worrisome increase in part-time and freelance work with limited or nonexistent benefits, achieving a fair and adequate sharing of parental responsibilities has become an even greater challenge.

While Quebec may be more progressive and generous than the rest of Canada in terms of paid parental leave and affordable childcare (not to mention affordable tuition fees that make it easier to raise and educate children), it still pales in comparison to Nordic countries like Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, where elementary school teachers all have master's degrees and the profession is revered.

We have a long way to go to catch up.

In the meantime, many young fathers who want to take on a larger role in childrearing are often prevented from doing so or discriminated against by both societal expectations and government policies that assume women are the primary caretakers. The current system isn't fair for any father who wants to truly be involved in their children's upbringing.

"I wrote this book so I could open the debate," says Hamelin. "I didn't write it to be right. I wrote it so that motherhood and fatherhood cease to be individual endeavours and private ventures. This is a structural problem that collectively affects us all. We need to work together to improve things, otherwise we'll never achieve equal opportunity, because a vast percentage of women have children."

-reprinted from Ricochet

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equality ^[5]

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