

As child-care costs rise, some provinces push back on economic sexism ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Once again — as if parents needed more proof — a major report shows unaffordable child care is hurting working class families. Fortunately, in some provincial capitals something is finally being done about it.

The report ^[3], by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, shows Canadian child-care costs are extremely high — and rising faster than inflation. In Toronto, the average monthly infant cost is \$1,758 — over \$21,000 a year. In Calgary, it's \$1,250 a month. In Ottawa, \$998. In Edmonton, \$990.

For two-parent families, it's often cheaper for one parent to quit working than pay for child care. Single parents are pushed onto social assistance. Failing to act is stupid, stupid social and economic policy.

For a Calgary family with two kids in care, a saw-off point comes at an income of about \$35,000 — that's when the cost of two child-care spots is more than one parent's take-home pay. For a Toronto family, it's around \$50,000.

And as costs rise faster than wages, that saw-off point moves even higher. The result is many Canadians quit working. These are people who want to go out every day to build our economy and contribute to society. But it doesn't make financial sense.

And let's be really blunt — mostly, it's women who take the hit. They're being systematically driven out of their jobs by high child-care costs. When they return, they've lost income, skills, experience and promotion opportunities. It's a systemic factor maintaining the wage gap between men and women. It's sexist.

It doesn't have to be this way. Manitoba and Quebec have province-wide fee maximums. The average cost in Winnipeg is \$651 a month. And in Montreal it's just \$168 a month.

Pauline Marois, the first woman to be Quebec premier, introduced an affordable child-care plan in 1997. At that time, 76% of Quebec women aged 25 to 44 were in the labour force. By 2014, it had boomed to 85% — highest in Canada.

Pierre Fortin, economics professor at the University of Quebec in Montreal, has calculated the impact of that employment boom. His analysis shows that with more people paying taxes and fewer on social assistance, the boom has generated considerably more financial benefit than the cost of the program — it pays for itself. The Quebec plan cost \$2.5 billion in 2016.

National leadership would be wonderful. Unfortunately, it's not there. Next year, the Ottawa Liberals spend \$4.1 billion on tax cuts for the affluent. But only \$540 million for child care. Disappointing.

But progress is coming in several provincial capitals. Rachel Notley, the first woman to be Alberta premier, launched a \$25-a-day child-care pilot project this year. And the new government in British Columbia — Carole James, finance minister — last week confirmed it will launch \$10-a-day child care. It's expected to cost about \$1.5 billion a year.

And it's likely to be a major Ontario election issue.

PC Leader Patrick Brown recently gave himself a talking point with a proposed child-care tax break. But at just \$390 million, it's weak sauce compared to other provinces. And Brown's plan doesn't cap rising costs. It might even push fees higher.

Last October, NDP Leader Andrea Horwath released a draft plan that would set a provincial fee scale. Her final plan isn't out yet. But a bold plan from Horwath could be the next big step in reducing systemic economic sexism in Canada and benefiting parents and kids.

Tom Parkin is a former NDP staffer and social democrat media commentator.

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