

No equality without universal child care ^[1]

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Since International Women's Day was first observed in the early 20th century, feminists have celebrated their accomplishments and noted their challenges: the what's-missings and what-could-have-beens as women struggle for gender equality. As we celebrate rejuvenated feminism this year, we are also reminded by Canada's indifferent approach to child care that the fight for equality is far from won. Today more than ever, it is evident that the lack of affordable child care remains a central barrier to equality for women with children.

On International Women's Day 2018, several significant historical milestones help us gauge what it means that child care is still missing from Canada's gender equality plans. The first child care milestone dates nearly back 50 years, to when the Royal Commission on the Status of Women reported on its work. Its **1970 report**, ^[5] intended to "reduce gender inequality across the various spheres of Canadian society," was framed by four principles, one of which identified the care of children as a responsibility to be shared by mothers, fathers and society. Most significantly, it stated that "unless this shared responsibility is acknowledged and assumed, women cannot be accorded true equality" (emphasis added).

Of the commission's 167 recommendations, the call for publicly funded universal child care is one of the few on which there has been little meaningful progress.

A second milestone was reached on International Women's Day 1986, more than two decades later, with the **report** ^[6] of the first and only federal Task Force on Child Care. This expert group was appointed by Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau to "examine and assess the need for child care and parental leave in Canada, as well as the adequacy of current systems...and make recommendations on the federal government's role in the development of a national system of quality child care."

The task force's central recommendation was a universal system of affordable child care co-funded by federal and provincial governments. The group envisioned affordable, or even free, child care services, designed and managed by provinces under national standards, built through a gradual increase in the supply of regulated not-for-profit facilities until the year 2001, when a mature system would serve all children and families. The task force calculated that, at that time, the cost of a fully developed universal child care system would be \$11.3 billion — half from the federal government (in 1970 dollars), an exponentially higher sum than the **2017 commitment** ^[7] by Justin Trudeau's government to spend \$870 million annually by 2026.

The groundbreaking task force report was immediately shelved by Brian Mulroney's government. It was another 18 years before Paul Martin's Liberals put substantial money on the table, in **2004** ^[8]: federal spending of \$1 billion annually, together with provincial-territorial action plans — only to see it all vanish when the Harper Conservatives axed the provincial-territorial agreements in 2006.

As a result, without the publicly funded child care now commonplace in many countries, Canada lacks this essential pillar of support for women's equality. Today, in all regions of Canada, mothers at all income levels struggle to be educated, support their families and build careers with little help from government in sharing the care of their children.

After Canada elected an avowed feminist, Justin Trudeau, the federal government re-entered the child care field in 2017. It committed to transferring modest amounts of money to provinces and territories to support correspondingly modest and targeted provincial-territorial advances in child care. Neither the funds nor the approach comes close to what the 1986 Task Force on Child Care or the 1970 Royal Commission on the Status of Women knew was necessary for women to be "accorded true equality."

It is still women who carry most of the burden of responsibility for child care, even though today more fathers take a bigger share in child rearing. Without significant federal funding and policy leadership, multiple generations of women still face challenges in balancing work and family and suffer economic insecurity. All in all, Canadian women receive shamefully little support from the country that relies on them for their hard work in creating a prosperous, productive modern society for us all.

It's now 2018, and women whose grandmothers greeted the Royal Commission's report with high hopes still don't have access to the affordable, high-quality child care it envisioned in 1970. The nearly-all-female child care workforce is still appallingly underpaid, often still earning less than parking lot attendants or zookeepers. Yet the 2018 federal budget — billed as a “gender equality budget” intended to encourage more women into employment — once again fails us. Without a federal funding and policy plan for building a universal child care system, the “motherhood penalty” will remain as real for women in 2026 as it was in 1970 or 1986.

Canada's growing, diverse and re-energized feminist movement should use this year's International Women's Day as the occasion to put universal child care back at the top of the gender equality agenda and compel political leaders to act on the abundant evidence that shows that “women cannot be accorded true equality” without it.

NOTE

This piece was first published in Policy Options (Institute for Research on Public Policy) on March 8 2018, available online. ^[9]

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