

# Trudeau talks a good game on gender diversity, but hasn't made the hard choices to do anything about it <sup>[1]</sup>

Kevin Carmichael: If Trudeau really wants to unleash the economic potential of Canada's women, he must do something to reduce the burden of child care

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## EXCERPTS

The National Post's John Ivison asked this week whether there were any limits to how far Justin Trudeau will go to foster diversity and inclusion?

Answer: Yes. And that's too bad.

Those whose knowledge of Canada's first openly feminist prime minister is based on their reading of, say, Rolling Stone, might be surprised to learn that Trudeau has yet to attempt anything particularly difficult when it comes to narrowing the gender divide.

Surrounding himself with as many women as men in cabinet was a wonderful gesture, but hardly risky for an aspirational leader counting on the support of highly educated urbanites, a voting block that is majority female.

In its latest World Economic Outlook, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said Canada was doing too little to lower the cost of child care, foster flexible work arrangements, and encourage fathers to take on more of the burden of caring for infants. No other country was singled out as often as Canada in a short section that took up less than half a page. The IMF's message was that it's the hard stuff that actually makes a difference.

Face it, Trudeau fans: If your guy was a figure skater, he'd get good marks for completing a clean program, and then lose points because he was too chicken to attempt a quad jump.

Now, if you are looking for another commentary mocking Trudeau's feminism, you will have to go elsewhere. This stuff matters. In Davos last month, the Prime Minister cited a McKinsey Global Institute study from 2017 that says Canada could add \$150 billion to gross domestic product in less than a decade by pulling more women into the the labour force. The reason is because economic growth is largely determined by a country's population of economic actors and the ability of those individuals to create wealth.

With the Boomer generation retiring, we're losing economic actors faster than we are replacing them. Immigration makes up for some of the loss, and so can encouraging the millions of women on the margins of the economy to start companies, take jobs, or take on contract work.

In Canada, about 83 per cent of women between the ages of 25 and 54 were employed in 2017, compared with 91 percent of men in the

same age group. That's a lot of wasted potential. Trudeau, to his credit, recognizes that maintaining current living standards will require getting more out of the country's women.

The problem is that he's not trying hard enough.

Trudeau doesn't see it that way, of course. "We have to drive this change," he said in Davos. "We know what needs to be done. It is well past time that we listen, learn, and finally, lead."

The prime minister's favourite example of what he's done to get more women working is the Canada Child Benefit, the Harper-era family tax credit that the Liberal government overhauled to better target poorer parents. Trudeau said 90 per cent of the single mothers that qualify for a payment earn less than \$60,000 per year, and receive \$9,000 in tax-free benefits.

Trudeau's child benefit may work as a socio-economic leveler, and it probably provides some economic stimulus, but it won't do much to narrow the gender gap in the labour force.

Study after study by the IMF and others show that if a country really wants to unleash the economic potential of its women, then it must do something to reduce the burden of child care.

The child benefit obviously will help some families with those costs, but it's not big enough to make a material difference in places such as Vancouver and Toronto, where the median cost of childcare each month is \$1,360 and \$1,758, respectively, according to the Centre for Policy Alternatives.

By comparison, the median monthly cost of child care in Montreal is a mere \$168. Quebec heavily subsidizes daycare fees. To be sure, that comes at a cost: the province has some of the country's highest tax rates in the country. But if the goal is to get more women working, the province is without equal; almost 87 per cent of Quebec women between 25 and 54 worked in 2017, compared with about 91 percent of men, according to Statistics Canada.

The next closest province was Prince Edward Island, at 85 per cent. The rates of women participation in the labour market in Ontario, Alberta and Newfoundland and Labrador were less than 82 per cent.

But you don't hear Trudeau talking about subsidizing daycare, even though he would have lots of examples of its benefits on display in his Montreal riding.

Nor do you hear him talk about how the Canada Child Benefit probably encourages as many women to stay home with their children as it does the opposite. That's because he's given some parents an incentive to shun paid work: If family income drops, the child benefit rises. Therefore, for a new job to make sense, a stay-at-home parent would have to earn enough to cover child care and whatever her or his family would lose from the child benefit.

"The child benefit does not add an incentive to work or get job training," a team of IMF economists observe in a 2017 report on Canada's gender policies. The authors acknowledged that subsidizing daycare might be more than some populations are willing — or able — to pay. If that's the case, then policies meant to narrow the gender gap should be reserved for parents who work or seek to upgrade their skills, they said.

So if you want to be cynical about Trudeau's feminism, do so for the right reason.

He and other leaders must find ways to involve more women in the economy. Sadly, Trudeau's biggest effort in this regard to date is more a sop to his voters than a policy that will narrow the gender divide.

-reprinted from the Financial Post

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