

Opinon: Free child care would foster gender equality ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Many women, notably those who bravely exit abusive relationships, become saddled with unpaid childcare — a reality that only aggravates the poverty experienced by many women in our communities. The B.C. government could remedy this problem by implementing free childcare — something that may soon happen in the Province of Ontario — potentially a giant leap for gender equality.

Childcare has major implications for women’s economic security and safety. Not having access to childcare can be a barrier to employment that traps women in cycles of poverty and makes them dependent on abusive partners.

A 2016 report by the Vancouver-based group West Coast LEAF found that quality childcare is limited in B.C. and tends to be prohibitively expensive. Finding a childcare spot that accommodates parents with irregular work hours can be particularly difficult.

Workers doing nights shifts at a convenience store or fast-food restaurant may find themselves out of luck.

For women experiencing the cycle of poverty, the lack of childcare can mean being stuck on loop. According to social assistance policies, women are generally “employment obligated” once their kids reach the age of three. That means they have to engage in a weekly search for employment just to continue receiving benefits — before their children are even going to school during the day.

If these women do manage to find a job, social assistance is cut and someone has to take care of the kids during the workday. Childcare isn’t cheap and it cuts into the already slim revenues of single women who are often supporting a family without help from a former partner.

As one community worker recently remarked at a public meeting about poverty in the Burns Lake area: “How much are you supposed to work on minimum wage to pay for a sitter?”

In Ontario, the Liberal Party has promised universal childcare in exchange for another term in office. It’s easy to dismiss this as just an empty promise from an unpopular government, but free childcare is long overdue. The Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women recommended a national public child care system back in 1970. If the federal government isn’t ready to take the lead, the B.C. government should follow Ontario’s example.

People who oppose the policy will typically point to the price tag and appeal to fears about higher personal taxes or even a Greek-style public debt crisis. But governments could also raise money for this kind of program by taxing corporations and the rich, two groups that have more money than they know what to do with.

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