

More women in Quebec's workforce, thanks to daycare policy: study ^[1]

"Women's labour market participation is really the thing that works in the Quebec child care model," researcher says.

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EXCERPTS

The percentage of women 15 to 44 who participate in the labour force has been higher in Quebec than in Ontario since 2003, but while that percentage has continued to increase in Quebec — going from 78 per cent in 2003 to 81 per cent in 2016 — it has declined slightly in Ontario — from 77 per cent in 2003 to 75 per cent in 2016.

That growth, according to Melissa Moyser and Anne Milan, the authors of the study, is largely due to a growing percentage of women with young children in the workforce.

The percentage of Quebec women in the workforce whose youngest child was under three rose 19 percentage points between 1996 and 2016, from 61 per cent to 80 per cent.

In Ontario, the participation rate among women whose youngest child was under three rose four percentage points, from 66 per cent in 1996 to 70 per cent in 2016.

The most likely reason for the difference, according to Moyser and Milan, is that Quebec and Ontario began to take different paths when it comes to childcare in 1997, when the Quebec government implemented a universal low-fee program.

"Most of the recent increase in the female labour force participation rate in Quebec, relative to Ontario, occurred among women for whom preschool child care or before- and after-school care is most relevant," Moyser and Milan write.

In Quebec, where the government now also subsidizes some private daycares and provides tax credits to parents whose children have unsubsidized spaces in private daycares, the cost of child care and housekeeping services rose by 28 per cent between 1996 and 2016, according to Statistics Canada, compared with a 72 per cent increase in Ontario.

The high cost of child care in Ontario can force women to make difficult choices.

"Speaking as a child care researcher but also as a parent, you have to weigh the cost and benefits," said Brooke Richardson, who teaches in the early childhood studies program at Ryerson University. "Especially if you have more than one child, the cost of child care is typically prohibitive to working."

In Toronto, the median cost of daycare in 2017 ranged from \$14,544 a year for a preschooler, to \$21,096 a year for an infant, according to a study by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Those high costs will push some women to leave the workforce, while others will stay in the workforce, even if it costs them more in the short-term, to preserve their labour market attachment.

“If you’re out of the labour force for five years, it’s hard to get back into it,” Richardson said.

“Women’s labour market participation is really the thing that works in the Quebec child care model,” said Olivier Jacques, a PhD student at McGill University who co-authored a report on comparing provincial daycare systems that was published by the Institute for Research on Public Policy.

While studies show that public Centres de la petite enfance are higher quality and contribute more to children’s cognitive development, the fact that a large percentage of children are in private daycares, means the overall system contributes less to the children’s cognitive development than it should and doesn’t prepare children for school the way it was originally intended, he said.

And while Quebec’s child care program is generous by Canadian standards, Jacques said Quebec’s government investment in child care is below the average of the 36 wealthy nations in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

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