

# Have women disappeared from the messaging around child care?<sup>[1]</sup>

If women are written out of the public and political discourse around child care, policies may fail to meet concerns specific to women and mothers.

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online<sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

When it was launched in July 2016, the Canada Child Benefit (CCB) — Canada’s main child care benefit at the national level — was celebrated by politicians and news outlets as a “game-changer” for Canadian families. Replacing the Harper Conservatives’ Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB), the “beefed-up benefits” were thought to be a win for Canadian parents.

The way the Liberals characterized the benefit, and how the benefit was subsequently portrayed in the media, was in keeping with a 20-year-old trend. Despite the fact that child care is closely linked to women’s income levels and equality at work and at home, women and gender equality have been de-emphasized in Canadian child benefits policy. In its place, the messaging focuses on child development, school preparedness and affordability for middle-class and working families.

Changing the narrative has important implications. Future child care policy decisions might fail to address the societal challenges that are specific to women, including the fact they are more likely to head lone-parent families than men, make less money than men and generally experience poverty at higher rates than men do.

To better understand how child care was being framed by both the Harper and Trudeau governments, we conducted a media content analysis of news coverage on the UCCB and CCB from January 1, 2015, to July 31, 2016, in six English-language major dailies in Canada.

We examined how much news stories discuss women as beneficiaries of child policies and whether this changed with the transition to the CCB. We also looked at whether women journalists analyzed the policy differently than their male colleagues, following on the idea that women do provide a different voice on political and economic issues at times, in newsrooms, legislatures and corporate boardrooms.

### Framing gender under the UCCB versus the CCB

The UCCB and CCB were both presented in news coverage as largely gender-neutral, family-centred policies intended to benefit parents and children instead of women and mothers. When stories talk about who benefits, or ought to benefit, from the policies, we find that 95 percent of the references are about parents, and only 5 percent talk about what these policies mean for women and mothers. Discussions about women and gender were included in less than one-third of the articles.

Did things change after Justin Trudeau’s Liberals won the election in October 2015? When we look at shifts over the timeline of our sample, we find surprisingly little change in the framing of the child benefits. We see a slight increase in references to women in coverage of the UCCB and CCB during the election period, which we attribute to the proposed (but cancelled) women’s issues debate among party leaders. Despite this apparent uptick around September 2015, the proportion of references to women as beneficiaries did not change markedly between the end of the Stephen Harper Conservative government and the beginning of Trudeau’s tenure.

Although more post-election stories focus on the role of the benefits in aiding child poverty, we find little evidence of a shift in news coverage on the benefits. As targets and beneficiaries of child policies, women indeed appear to be “written out” of the story, as political scientist Jane Jenson has described.

### Women journalists and the framing of child benefits

Although we find little focus on women and gender in coverage of child benefits overall, did women journalists offer a different perspective that is more attentive to women’s experiences and needs? A fair amount of analysis of general political coverage, including election coverage of men and women politicians, finds no major differences in men and women journalists’ coverage. But, on a policy issue that deeply affects a large portion of Canadian women, do women journalists tell a different story?

The answer we derived from our study is yes. The proportion of female journalists’ stories that talked about women as policy beneficiaries was 11 percentage points higher than that of their male colleagues. While male journalists’ stories often centred on issues related to

taxation (such as the policies' connection to income splitting and family taxation), female journalists were more likely to address the costs, spaces and accessibility of child care in general.

We also find that women journalists use different sources. Male journalists are more inclined to cite politicians and experts as their primary sources, while women journalists more often cite parents and advocacy groups. Indeed, parents represented 21 percent of women journalists' sources but only 2 percent of men's, suggesting that female journalists provide a larger platform to mothers' and fathers' perspectives in this policy debate.

Our findings pertaining to women journalists' perspectives on child benefits offer, in many ways, more questions than answers. Are women journalists inclined to discuss the policies in relation to women intentionally? Are they championing a feminist agenda or perhaps speaking from their own experiences as mothers, or about mothers close to them? Or are they more likely to get assigned pieces about child policies or expected to represent "women's perspectives" in the newsroom? Although we do not have answers to these questions, the results of our analysis suggest that women journalists may play an integral role in shaping child care policy debates.

Child care and benefits are likely to remain high on the public radar for years to come. With the upcoming federal election, we will see whether the Trudeau Liberals will continue their efforts with the CCB to shore up support among middle-class families or women. Moreover, with the Ford government in Ontario hinting at the potential discontinuation of full-day kindergarten, this and other early childhood education policies are squarely on the agenda.

Given that child care policies are developing and changing across Canada, it is important that we continue analyzing how they are framed in discussion and practice. Indeed, these programs are not set in stone, and how we talk about child care and benefits can make a big difference in how they are taken up by governments and policy officials.

If women are written out of the public discourse and policy discussions around child care, these policies may fail to meet concerns specific to women and mothers, such as the wage gap and women's continued risks regarding gendered poverty. In effect, unremitting efforts to move women's perspectives from the margins to the core of coverage on child care are critical to the policy advancements we hope to see in years to come.

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**Region:** [Canada](#) <sup>[3]</sup>

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