

COVID-19 and Canada's (non-existent) childcare strategy ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The unprecedented shock of the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the federal and provincial governments' woefully inadequate childcare strategies and their impact on working mothers. When schools and daycares across the country were shuttered, families, and especially women, who still do a disproportionate amount of care work, found themselves having to balance full-time childcare with employment.

Women have been hit hard by the pandemic. The service sector, where women are highly represented in areas like retail, dining, and hospitality, was the first to cut or put jobs on pause when the pandemic was declared. Many more women have reduced their hours or dropped out of the workforce entirely to perform caring duties at home. Those who continue to work struggle to negotiate the competing priorities of work and care.

Though a recent study shows that men have been taking on more caretaking tasks and housework during the pandemic, women are still performing a majority of household duties. For single mothers, the burden of care becomes even more onerous without a partner to share the workload and with only one income to rely on. Without affordable childcare options, many women may remain outside the workforce indefinitely, gendering Canada's economic recovery and imperiling hard-fought gains in employment equity. Government support for childcare is key to ensuring an equitable return to the labour force for working women during and after the pandemic.

While daycares have opened and most schooling will resume in September, this will not solve the problem of inadequate childcare. Many parents will keep children at home, worried about their risk of contracting COVID-19. Students will no longer be allowed to attend school if they have any of the wide range of symptoms associated with COVID-19, meaning that students will spend more days at home than usual. Children may need to isolate at home for extended periods if classmates or teachers test positive. In some provinces, students will be home part of the time, leaving parents, usually mothers, scrambling to arrange childcare.

Women have been demanding greater government support for childcare for years. In 1970, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women published a landmark report containing recommendations to improve women's access to equal opportunities for employment in Canada. Women who participated in the commission advocated for childcare to improve gender equity in employment, arguing that women should be free to choose whether to work outside the home, and that childcare was the responsibility of mothers, fathers, and society. The report called on the federal government to support women's equality through labour-force participation by developing a national childcare plan. Fifty years after the RCSW report's release, women's economic prospects have improved greatly, but a national childcare program has yet to be realized.

The situation with COVID-19 is particularly complex, but history has shown that governments have provided childcare when they deemed it essential. During World War II, when labour was desperately needed, the federal government passed the Dominion Provincial Wartime Day Nursery Agreement, a cost-sharing program that allowed some provinces to provide daycare for the children of female war workers. Ultimately, the province of Ontario created twenty-eight day nurseries, while six were established in Québec. In the late 1990s, Québec, concerned about declining fertility rates and wanting to improve early childhood opportunities for children, especially low-income children, introduced a \$5/day daycare program. This was subsequently increased to \$7/day. Today, higher-income parents pay even more. While the program has been criticized for failing to achieve its goals of improving outcomes for lower-income children and for long waiting lists, publicly funded daycare in Québec has significantly increased women's workforce participation.

If childcare is not made readily available as economies across Canada reopen more fully, it will be more difficult for women to recover historic gains in the labour market. Not only are women perceived as natural caregivers, but they also tend to make less money than men. With families bracing for tough economic times ahead and schools uncertain of a return to regular in-class learning, these factors could cause women to leave their jobs to shoulder the greater burden of care. Federal and provincial governments must establish a national childcare program to eliminate one more barrier that keeps interested women out of the workforce.

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