

For 50 years, Canadian women have needed child care. Then came COVID ^[1]

In 1970, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women linked universal child care to gender equality. Without it, COVID-19 is wrecking women's careers.

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EXCERPTS

As wave after wave of the pandemic pummels our world, working women have felt the sand rushing away from under their feet. In the first six months of COVID-19, women across the globe were hit harder than men in terms of just about everything: job loss, fewer hours of paid work and an increase in household labour. That's according to everyone from United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, to the World Trade Organization, to Canadian economists like Toronto's Armine Yalnizyan. "You can't juggle child care, home-schooling and paid work," Yalnizyan told BNN Bloomberg in September. "I guarantee you that as this thing continues, more women will be throwing in the towel."

The lockdown was bound to hurt everyone's economic and social well-being, of course. According to Statistics Canada, though, more than half of female workers (56 percent, compared to 13.1 percent of men) are engaged in jobs involving what the Canadian Women's Foundation calls the Five C's: caring, clerical, catering, cashiering and cleaning. This not only puts them at high risk of contracting COVID-19 but also of losing their livelihoods entirely. Combine that with the sudden push back into the kitchen—along with home-schooling the kids—and most of the gains women have won in our working lives are at real risk of being swept away.

That's true even during attempts at a cautious, bumpy recovery. However, there's one enlightened measure that could help safeguard society from this stunning level of harm: child care. Universal, affordable, high-quality, non-profit child care. Put starkly, women will never enjoy the same freedom and success that men have in their working lives as long as they shoulder the overwhelming share of child care.

It's hard to contemplate the current wreckage of women's dreams for advancement without some bitter reflection on how long and hard we have fought to make governments pay attention to the child care crisis. In the September Throne Speech, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau cited the report from Canada's Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW), which marks its 50th anniversary this year. As he noted, its most resounding recommendation for women's equality was universal, government-funded child care. He pledged to create such a national system now.

That promise is welcome but also something promised by a long line of PMs before him. I know, because I've written about the child care crisis throughout my years as a Canadian journalist, not to mention as a mother who could have used it in 1970, the first time it was proposed.

Anniversaries give us a chance to mark how far we've come—or haven't. Beginning in 1967, the RCSW journeyed across the country to probe and document the status of Canadian women, particularly the sex discrimination that prevented full participation in the economy. Years of hearings culminated in December 1970, when a monumental, 500-page report thudded onto parliamentarians' desks. Running through it was a clear theme: the need for a national child care infrastructure. Across Canada, women knew that without it, wage parity and equal opportunity would never exist.

Fast-forward to our COVID-19 reality, and witness the truth of that half-century-old warning. The long neglect of the Royal Commission's recommendations by male-dominated governments has entrapped women in a maze of painful choices. Before the pandemic, large segments of the female population—particularly the racialized and Indigenous—were already locked into inequality and poverty. Now, we're facing what Yalnizyan has dubbed a "she-cession," a potentially decades-long era of slow growth in which everyone will lose, but women will lose the most.

In 1967, the feminist movement (then commonly called "women's liberation") was just stirring to life in Canada. Doris Anderson, the boundary-pushing editor of *Chatelaine*, was regularly writing ringing editorials demanding fairness and justice for women. She had an even sharper-tongued comrade-in-arms in Laura Sabia, a city councillor in St. Catharines, Ont., and rabble-rouser for equal pay, legal abortion and more opportunities for women.

Sabia organized a lobby group to pressure for a Royal Commission focusing on economic and social opportunity for women, including

access to abortion and child care. Partisan lines weren't as ironclad back then: Liberal cabinet minister Judy LaMarsh played good cop to naughty Sabia, who was a Progressive Conservative (as the Conservative party then styled itself). In one CBC interview, LaMarsh lectured women "not to act like harpies" or they wouldn't get their way.

Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson was stubbornly opposed to the commission, until Sabia outrageously threatened to bring two million women to march on Ottawa in protest. In 1967, Pearson caved.

At the time, women's issues were treated with either amused condescension or bruising contempt. After the RCSW was announced, one Maclean's headline chirped, "Cheer Up, Girls, Help Is on the Way." CBC commentator Gordon Donaldson sniped that "women are demanding equality while retaining the special privileges of a lady."

Most media men adopted the attitude that the commission was "too silly to be viewed with alarm," as the Calgary Herald quipped. Even the appointed head of the commission, Florence Bird, referred to herself as "chairman" and later confided to Maclean's that she was not a feminist. (She recanted after listening to the anguished stories of harsh discriminations faced everywhere, from archaic marriage laws to the labour market.)

Bird was a patrician American from Philadelphia who had settled in Canada and become a broadcaster and journalist. Her white hair was swept into an elegant chignon, her wardrobe was impeccable and her voice was commonly described as "plummy." She signed herself "Mrs. John Bird." Her fellow commissioners were equally white and privileged, including two men who were frequently heard wondering, as the commission visited 14 Canadian towns and cities, whether women's place wasn't "really in the home."

Nevertheless, the commission distributed leaflets in supermarkets and libraries to encourage submissions; telephone lines were set up for women who couldn't travel to hearings; and public sessions were arranged at times convenient for housewives and working women.

I was busy at home with my newborn second child when the hearings started, with a third born just before the final report was issued. As a cradle feminist, compelled to freelance from home for lack of child care, I was not impressed by the very cautious middle-class and establishment stance of the commission, and its insistence on the nuclear family as the only possible underpinning of society.

Bird was careful to put a distance between herself and outspoken women like Sabia, LaMarsh and Anderson. "Any militancy or outrage?" prodded a TV journalist, the day of Bird's appointment. "No, we're more in sorrow than in anger," Bird smilingly replied. "Women are not resentful" and besides, "we're our own worst enemy." Perhaps it's not surprising, then, that the report her commission produced didn't discuss male violence (either physical or sexual) against women.

How does the 1970 report emerge from the acid bath of time and rigorous feminist analysis? Raggedly. Its shortcomings and oversights make me cringe today, and are a jolting reminder of how much is left to do. Although it cited the work of Simone de Beauvoir as its inspiration, it never tried to plumb the workings of the patriarchy, or even to name it.

Worst of all, it veered toward outright racism, dismissing the issues raised by women it called "Indians, Eskimos and immigrants" with shocking indifference, and not even mentioning discrimination against other women of colour. Two and a half million women expressed their grievances to the commissioners, including in 1,000 letters and 468 briefs. But if Indigenous women had not found the resources and will to make themselves heard, it's doubtful the commissioners would have spared them a thought.

Residential schools were still widespread, and the report criticized "Indian mothers" who somehow failed to understand the value of their children's education there. The poverty of Indigenous women was virtually ignored. And although a delegation of 30 Mohawk women made an impassioned argument for changes to the Indian Act, under which Indigenous women and their children were stripped of their treaty rights if they married white men, the Royal Commission barely mentioned the issue. (Indigenous women never stopped pushing—as documented in Chatelaine's archives—and some of those changes have since been achieved.)

My original skepticism did moderate a bit after I joined Anderson's Chatelaine as a writer in 1971. I began to understand that even with its flaws, the RCSW was a landmark in Canadian women's history. It sparked a thousand conversations, cast an unforgiving light on sexist stereotyping in schools, media and advertising, and lent gravitas to feminist concerns. Its toughest areas of focus, on equal pay, pensions, unemployment insurance and child care—even a guaranteed income for single mothers—provided feminist activists with a useful goad for laggard governments.

Best of all, for more than two decades, the commission worked like yeast in Canadian politics. In early 1971, feminist activists created the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) to pressure the government to enact the report's 167 recommendations. Their first success: forcing the government to create the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (CAC) in 1973.

For many years, the council was a wellspring of research and funding. Anderson was its highly visible chair from 1979 to 1981, when she quit in protest. Her CAC had organized a conference about Pierre Elliott Trudeau's cherished Charter of Rights and Freedoms, but the Liberal government was pressuring her to cancel it—fearing, rightly, being publicly humiliated for omitting women's rights from the Charter. The conference defiantly proceeded anyway, and Anderson crossed over to become the chair of the NAC. The battle to make sure the rights and freedoms enshrined in the Charter "are guaranteed equally to male and female persons" was successful.

The NAC was a powerhouse all through the feminist '70s. In 1984, it forced the three main political parties to participate in a televised debate on women's issues during the federal election. But it all came to an end in the 1990s, when both the NAC and CAC folded after a decade of backlash and constant federal funding cuts.

And what came of the RCSW's clarion call for universal child care? A lot of government hedging, feinting and fumbling. Whatever halfway measures Liberal governments proposed by way of "early childhood education," Conservative governments subsequently yanked away on

ideological grounds. By the time the pandemic hit, an average-waged two-parent family in Canada was spending a quarter of its income on child care—a larger percentage than in any of the other 37 countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Women now make up nearly half the country's labour force, but have suffered much more than half of COVID-related job losses. As Yalnizyan has noted repeatedly—including in a call with Trudeau—the lack of child care will be a “choke point” of any recovery, and of a “she-covery” in particular. A giant step toward providing accessible child care is required to bolster our beleaguered economy.

Trudeau has heard the alarm bells ringing. Perhaps he's also considered the benefits. No less a corporate titan than the international management firm McKinsey & Company has said that taking immediate action to achieve gender equality—including child care—could, in 10 years, add \$13 trillion to the global economy. That child care is good for everyone has been obvious to Canadian women for half a century at least; maybe those potential trillions will finally be enough to spur action.

But I'm not holding my breath that we'll get the universal, affordable (that is, non-profit) and quality care we and our children so emphatically need and deserve. It might be time to act on Laura Sabia's old threat, and find a million women militant enough to march on Ottawa. Male-dominated governments will not act justly for women until they're terrified into it, either by massive, noisy protests or the threat of women collectively voting them out, out, out.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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