

Opinion: Ottawa knows Canada needs a child-care program. Why are we waiting? ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

If you're a mom who was praying that Ottawa would finally launch a national child-care program this week, sister, you're out of luck.

The government's fall economic statement, released late Monday afternoon, concedes that the COVID-19 crisis has caused a "she-cession" that has destroyed decades of labour force gains by women.

It even acknowledges that a national child-care system is badly needed because mothers are dropping out of the work force to care for their kids.

So, naturally, working mothers will have to wait until Ottawa unveils its next full budget, some time next year, for a glimpse of the government's long-awaited plan to provide affordable child care across the country.

"Canada cannot be competitive until all Canadian women have access to the affordable child care we need to support our participation in the work force," reads the federal government's fall economic statement.

"Budget 2021 will outline a plan to provide affordable, accessible and high-quality child care from ocean to ocean to ocean."

By all means, don't rush it.

Women have only been waiting 50 years for Ottawa to act on a key recommendation of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada to create a national child-care system by collaborating with the provinces and territories.

"Women like me, who were toddlers when this report was published, are now parents and grandparents," writes Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland in the economic statement. "We have waited generations for our government to answer the call."

So why are you still keeping us on hold?

Women need help now. A second wave of COVID-19 infections, the resulting lockdowns, the rise of virtual schooling and a scarcity of affordable daycare are driving women out of jobs.

Between February and October, 20,600 Canadian women left the labour force, while almost 68,000 men entered or reentered the work force, according to a report by RBC Economics.

"Women in two key cohorts are exiting the labour force faster: women aged 20-24 and 35-39," reads the RBC report.

"Women exiting the labour force face the risk of an erosion of skills, which may further exacerbate the gender wage gap that existed prior to the pandemic."

None of this should surprise the federal government. Some economists have been pushing legislators to put women first in the economic recovery since the spring. It's unacceptable that there's still no comprehensive national child-care plan.

For all its feel-good feminism, the sad truth is this government has a history of keeping women waiting when it comes to taking action on systemic injustices.

In 2016, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau chose to delay the introduction of pay-equity legislation for years. Pay-equity provisions were later included in Bill C-86, which received royal assent in December, 2018.

But the provisions, which apply to federally regulated workplaces such as banks, airlines and telecom companies, are still not in effect.

Women have long memories, so the government is sorely mistaken if it thinks it can placate working mothers with more platitudes. After more than eight months of this health and economic crisis, we've run out of patience.

Ottawa is already hinting that it may model a national plan after Quebec's subsidized daycare program.

So get on with it already, Mr. Prime Minister.

And while you're at it, pave the way for increased family reunification through immigration to provide yet another affordable child-care option for working parents. Many racialized Canadians, hit hard by this crisis, would have an easier time of it if their overseas relatives could help out with the kids.

Let's not pretend this child-care crisis started with COVID-19. Fact is, our federal government has been indifferent to the plight of working moms for decades.

Perhaps the real lesson here is that our federal, provincial and territorial politicians should learn how to work like a mother to get a national child-care program off the ground.

In the absence of a firm launch date after a 50-year wait, Ottawa's promise is just a sad reminder that a woman's work is never done.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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