

Advocates say child care, not venture capital, the best way to invest in women ^[1]

Women have had to make 'tough decisions' when it comes to child care during COVID-19 pandemic

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EXCERPT

Some women are criticizing Nova Scotia's recent \$5-million contribution to a venture capital fund targeting women-led businesses, saying it doesn't address the root cause of why women aren't returning to the workforce as often as men.

Outgoing Premier Stephen McNeil announced the contribution to Sandpiper Ventures on Feb. 5, prefacing it by noting working women have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"They not only lost their jobs, but they had a very hard time getting back into the workforce, let alone finding a well-paying job," he said.

"We need women to be active members of our economy, we need women to drive our economy, and we need women in business and in the tech sector and we need women entrepreneurs."

But some have been quick to point out that child care is one of the main reasons women exited the workforce in greater numbers during the pandemic, and it remains a big obstacle to returning.

Women left with tough decisions

For Katie Keddy, a farmer and a mother of two, her family had to make some "tough decisions" when schools were shut down last spring. Keddy, who works for Charles Keddy Farms in Lakeville with her husband and in-laws, also worked at a part-time job when the pandemic arrived.

When schools were shut down, she took time away from both her jobs to look after her boys, age six and eight. They spent two months in New Brunswick, where Keddy is from originally, which allowed her husband to focus on the farm.

"For how far we've come in agriculture as women, it fell back to traditional roles very quickly, out of, for lack of a better word, necessity," she said.

"Those were the decisions that we made for our family that were best at the time, but it was tough."

In the spring, Keddy had advocated for a program put in place to help women in agriculture with child care, but that "fell on deaf ears."

While there is a need for more female entrepreneurs and capital for women, she said: "How can you do that without the child-care industry being valued and the government really seeing what we need?"

"And the two go hand in hand – child care and the access to capital for women."

A patchwork of child care

Hannah Munday, who ran a private daycare in her home for more than 10 years, said child care in Nova Scotia is a challenge both for parents and operators.

Munday, a mother of three, started her business in 2009 after she had her second child, in part because she would have a tough time paying for two kids in care.

But the business has associated costs. Greater water use, insurance to cover business hours, food and snacks for kids, first aid certification and current background checks, along with items to keep the kids occupied.

That made it difficult to figure out what to charge.

"It's really challenging because you know exactly how much of their family income it's costing for you to look after their children, but you also know that you have to charge a reasonable rate," said Munday.

According to the 2019 child-care fee survey by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, families in Halifax pay an average of \$939 per month for infants, \$829 for toddlers, and \$861 for preschoolers.

Munday closed her business in August because her children were getting older, though she said if she hadn't already made the decision to close "COVID would have made that decision for me."

One major issue with the child-care system is that it isn't really even a system, said Munday.

There are three main avenues for child care: licensed daycares, day homes registered through provincial agencies, and private day homes, which is what she operated.

"We need the system to be more harmonized, first of all, because it is a patchwork right now, and that makes it really difficult to get anything done," she said. "It's really hard to turn the bus when there's three different bus drivers."

Investment in venture capital fund 'insulting'

This patchwork of care also creates some disparities between providers.

For instance, early childhood educators who work for the province's pre-primary program make more money and have better benefits than those working outside of the program, despite having the same qualifications.

And while there are subsidies for some eligible parents to help pay for child care, they only applies to licensed daycares.

While Munday would like to see the \$5 million spent on Sandpiper Ventures going to child care instead, she said this patchwork of care means it's difficult to say where exactly money should be allocated.

"That being said, to put it into a venture capital fund is not only out of touch with what parents need, it's actually pretty insulting to all of the women in this province who run home daycare businesses," she said.

"We are entrepreneurs. We're providing a service that the community needs and we are never acknowledged in that way, as small business owners, which we are."

In an email, Violet MacLeod, spokesperson for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, said the government provided more than \$30 million in COVID-related funding to the childhood sector during the mandated closure last spring "to ensure they were well-[supported] and ready to welcome families back when it was time to reopen."

"We've also invested more than \$70 million dollars in grants to support the regulated child care sector in such areas as, trained staff and quality programming, Inclusion support, infant care, family home child care, and the strategic growth of new and converted child care spaces," the statement said.

The case for universal child care

Christine Saulnier, Nova Scotia director for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, agreed the medley of different child-care services is a problem. She's calling for a system that's instead similar to public education.

"Child care is such an incredible investment," she said. "There's demand for it, there's need for it, it would help children, it would help women enter the workforce, it would create jobs, it would create economic growth."

In her statement, MacLeod said the federal government has committed to a plan for a Canadian universal child-care system, and federal-provincial meetings are underway to look at what that could entail.

Saulnier pointed to Quebec, which has a universal, low-cost child-care system. Research from economist Pierre Fortin from the University of Quebec described a "spectacular" impact on child-care utilization and the labour force participation of mothers since its inception more than 20 years ago.

Fortin's research also suggests the program helped grow the provincial economy and boosted income tax and consumption tax revenues flowing to provincial and federal coffers. He said the income tax generated by the increase of mothers entering the workforce more than offset the subsidies the government had to pay.

In his 2017 study, Fortin did say the program is "still far from being perfect" and noted the quality of that care could be improved. Still, he said Quebec's system is more effective and less costly than traditional child-care systems.

"Basically, it's paid for itself," said Saulnier.

Region: Nova Scotia ^[3]

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