

Why elections matter: National child-care plan could create workplace gender equality ^[1]

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Canada's progress on gender equality in economic participation and opportunity has stalled since 2006, when the World Economic Forum started measuring it. In fact, it has reversed while other countries have surged ahead.

Gender inequality in Canadian workplaces is most pronounced in leadership. Women comprise 15 per cent of small- and medium-sized enterprise owners and four per cent of CEOs; only 15 per cent of businesses have three or more women on their boards.

Michaele Ferguson, a professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder, argues that the absence of women in power positions amounts to a "systematic exclusion of women from involvement in shaping the world in which they live."

How will the minority government that Canadians recently re-elected bring about such progress? To answer this question, I examine gender inequalities from two perspectives — the supply and demand sides — and delve into how policy can bring about progress.

Supply side gender inequality

Women and men supply their labour differently, which is heavily shaped by societal norms that typically assign care work predominantly to women and often stigmatize those women who don't take on those responsibilities. Women are overwhelmingly the (unpaid) primary caregivers at home. Accordingly, women supply less labour to the paid labour market than men.

In September 2021, women continued to have a lower labour market participation rate at 84.8 per cent than men at 92.1 per cent.

Given social norms, affordable child care is crucial for enabling women to participate in the paid labour market.

In its last budget, the government committed to funding child care across Canada, and the Liberals promised to uphold the pledge during the election campaign.

Whether and when we will see a national child-care strategy enacted depends on how long the new government will last and how much leeway provinces have in implementing the proposed plan. Should it succeed, it would help alleviate pent-up labour supply and address the supply side of workplace gender inequality.

Demand side gender inequality

Employers demand labour differently from women and men, which is also shaped by societal norms that position men as assertive, rational and ambitious, and women as caregiving, emotional and gentle. This privileges men and disadvantages women in the workplace, including during hiring, performance evaluation and promotion.

For example, many people are hired into jobs based on their gender. As the pandemic painfully illustrated, more women are employed in service-producing industries (like hospitality) and more men are hired in goods-producing and professional occupations (like construction and engineering).

The services sector experienced significant declines in demand due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and customer concerns about infection. The rapid digitization and automation fuelled by the pandemic might further change how businesses operate and what employees they need, including those in the services industry.

Fixing demand-side inequality requires grappling with societal norms, which evolve slowly. The proposed national child-care initiative, which could allow women to transition from unpaid caregiving work at home to paid work, addresses the woman-as-caregiver norm. It could break the bond between women and caregiving work; women would no longer be slotted into service occupations, which would open up more for men.

It might therefore further contribute to weakening the link between men and goods-producing and professional occupations, which could then welcome more women.

Training is key

Changing societal norms can be also achieved via training. The pandemic closed many businesses in the services industry, giving employees an opportunity to retrain, upskill or change occupations.

Governments can help by facilitating training. In 2019, a tax credit was introduced for Canadians who incur training fees. In its election platform, the Liberal Party proposed further training initiatives. The NDP, likely a key player in the new minority government, emphasizes training and lifelong learning in its election platform.

How many of these promises will actually become real policy and help employees update their skills remains to be seen.

Nonetheless, the recent federal election could be a game-changer for organizational gender inequality. In particular, the proposed Canada-wide child-care strategy could have a profound impact, spurring gender equality in both the supply and demand of labour.

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