

Immigrant women suffer financially for taking maternity leave: 4 ways Canada can improve ^[1]

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Source: The Conversation

Format: Article

Publication Date: 5 Mar 2024

AVAILABILITY

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Excerpts

Canada is facing a critical shortage of caregivers, both paid and unpaid. And those who do this vital work face significant pressures that are impacting their lives. In particular, there are high costs to immigrant women for taking time off of paid work to care for their own babies.

Immigrant women disproportionately work caring for children, elderly adults and people living with disabilities. At the same time, immigrant care workers earn low incomes and experience precarious employment. The fact that these women experience further economic penalties for taking maternity or parental leave is a pressing social issue.

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The data revealed patterns of who is providing unpaid care for children. Women were more than eight times as likely as men to be caring for children or on parental leave.

Immigrants were 1.8 times as likely to report these as their main activities compared with non-immigrants. Racialized populations were 1.5 times more likely than non-racialized populations to be providing this care.

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Notably, all immigrant women have much lower probabilities of having either the same or higher income after a birth-related career interruption.

This suggests that for immigrant women in Canada, in the vast majority of cases, income will be lower the year after a birth-related career interruption than prior. There are financial penalties for caring for their own children.

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What can the federal government do?

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First, immigrants who enter Canada via caregiver programs should be eligible to access maternity leave and workers compensation benefits regardless of whether their status in Canada is temporary or permanent. As well, encouraging better education regarding maternity and parental leave entitlements so immigrants know their rights might improve take-up rates.

Second, the government should increase and improve programs to support the labour market integration of immigrants coming to Canada via caregiver programs. This would include assisting with transfer and recognition of foreign credentials which has been widely identified as an area in need of support. This would also help immigrant care workers find work that is commensurate with their training and skills, likely with higher pay and better maternity benefits.

Third, further increasing federal funding for paid child-care provision would assist in alleviating the shortage of workers. Improving the quality, accessibility and affordability of paid child care would assist immigrant women in transitioning back to the labour market after having a baby. It would also improve pay for child-care workers, who are disproportionately immigrant and racialized women.

Fourth, governments need to look at reforming EI and other related programs through a gender-based analysis. This could include implementing new or more tax credits for unpaid caregiving, increasing flexibility in the definition of allowable expenses, changes to the child benefits system, increasing short-term programs to address deskilling from extended time outside of the labour market caring for children, and suggesting regulatory changes to the definition of self-employment for income tax purposes.

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Related link:

The high costs of caring: Measuring the prevalence and consequences of birth-related career interruptions for immigrant care wor^[3]

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