Nations thrive by helping families [CA] [1]

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EXCERPTS

Economists are leery about work-life balance. It is too abstract, too incompatible with market principles.

Governments treat family-friendly policies as a frill, a grudging concession to working women.

The media play up images of female executives rushing to daycare centres in their power suits; female lawyers struggling to meet their quota of billable hours after their kids are in bed; female celebrities wrestling with maternal guilt.

The issue is much bigger than this, says the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. Yesterday, the Paris-based international organization released the most comprehensive study ever done of the tug-of-war between work and family life.

Its conclusion: Countries that want to raise their standard of living, improve their fertility rate, reduce child poverty and narrow the pay gap between men and women have to get serious about offering parents healthier choices.

It is not just a matter of easing workplace stress, says Babies and Bosses. It is a question of how &em; sometimes whether &em; individuals contribute to a nation's economy.

"As long as there are people who are constrained in their choices about work/family balance, the result may be both too few babies and too little employment or unsatisfactory careers," says the 215-page report (available at www.oecd.org [2]).

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Here are its principal findings:

- Access to affordable preschool care is vital.

Without it, some women postpone or forgo having children. Others sacrifice their career to raise their children. Many make compromises &em; shortchanging their children or their employers &em; that eat away at them and impose an unfair burden on their co-workers.

For single mothers, the options are especially stark. Trapped between governments that require them to work and daycare centres that charge more than they can afford, they make tenuous babysitting arrangements or find ways to stay on welfare.

Canada fares badly in this regard. Child care costs 21.3 per cent of the average industrial wage, compared with 4.5 per cent in Sweden, 9.1 per cent in Germany, 19.5 per cent in the U.S. and 33.8 per cent in Switzerland. (The OECD average was 16.3 per cent.)

- Parental leave programs make a big difference.

They give mothers (and fathers in some countries) time to bond with their newborns while allowing them to stay in the workforce.

They encourage young couples to start families, rather than holding off until they can afford to interrupt their careers.

And they provide children with full-time personal care in the crucial early months of their lives.

Canada's policies place it in the middle of the pack. It lags behind most European countries, but is ahead of the U.S. and Japan.

- After-school care is badly needed.

By keeping schools open after classes, governments could go a long way toward aligning parents' and kids' schedules, alleviate pressure on workers to leave early and reduce the number of latchkey children.

Denmark and Sweden are the only countries with well-established programs. Britain and the Netherlands are moving in this direction.

- Employers are unlikely to act on their own.

Companies that offer flexible hours, work sharing and other family-friendly arrangements report reduced absenteeism, lower staff turnover and enhanced productivity. But the business case is not strong enough to convince most corporate executives.

This means governments have to take the lead, using tax measures, public programs and moral suasion.

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- reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Canada [3]

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