

Speak up, women!: There are billions of dollars on the table for child care, but it's important that we spend the money wisely [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Women should be breathing a collective sign of relief. After a string of broken promises, the Liberal government is poised to put \$5 billion of new money into child care. On Feb. 11, the ministers are meeting to wrap up the deal. So why aren't we celebrating?

There is no question that women have borne the burden of what the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development has called Canada's patchwork quilt of child care services. Since 1982, women with young children have flooded into the paid workforce. Today, a woman's work day, including paid and unpaid work, is 50-per-cent longer than it was then.

Mothers' participation in the paid workforce is higher in Canada than almost anywhere else in the developed world. Yet our child care services lag pathetically behind. This reflects a continuing ambivalence about the role of women in society. Even though 70 per cent of women with young children are in the paid labour force, publicly funded child care still challenges the traditional views about women's responsibility for raising children.

But finally Canada, at least at the federal level, is catching up to the rest of the world and recognizing that mothers with young children are in the workplace to stay, and that child care is essential to give our children a good start in life.

Our worry is that the money promised by the federal government will go into propping up an inadequate patchwork quilt of services rather than creating what the Liberals themselves call a new "system" of child care.

Today, only 15 per cent of mothers in the labour force with pre-school children use licensed, regulated child care. To qualify for a subsidy, women have to earn very low wages and go through an intrusive process where they are required to prove themselves poor or otherwise deficient.

Other parents must purchase child care, nursery-school spaces or preschool spaces in the open market. The cost of a licensed space, averaging \$6,000 a year for a three-year-old (despite alarmingly low rates of pay for child care workers), is unaffordable to the vast majority of families -- even more so if they have more than one child.

For child care to be accessible, we have to change the system. First, the funding should go to programs rather than to parents to ensure stable funding. Second, programs should be accessible to all, regardless of income. And third, expansion should be limited to non-profit child care, as research shows it provides superior quality.

Quebec has already turned the system on its head.

Instead of making parents pay the full cost of the care (or receiving a subsidy from government for those who were eligible), Quebec developed a publicly funded system of child care, along the lines of health, education and universities. The government undertook to stabilize child care by

providing direct funding to child care programs and then collecting a contribution -- \$7 a day (\$1,800 a year) -- from parents toward the costs.

Quebec also recognized the need to improve wages and working conditions for those working in the field in order to stabilize service and attract new, qualified recruits to the profession. This, too, is a women's issue. The average annual income for full-time early-childhood educators and assistants across Canada, almost all of them women, is just over \$19,000.

Quebec has a system that works, so why not use it as a basis for the new system that the federal government is talking about? As usual, the premiers are resisting federal standards, and the feds are unwilling to put teeth into standards because they want to be able to check child care off their list of promises kept before the next election.

Women will pay the price. It's hard enough to work full time and raise children without worrying every day about whether your children are getting the care and development they need. If ever there was a time for women to speak up, it is now.

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