

Having kids costly for educated moms [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Highly educated women face a much more severe loss of earning power when they have children compared to mothers with less education, says a report published yesterday by Statistics Canada.

The findings help shed light on the social and economic realities that are pushing more Canadian women to delay childbirth and have fewer children. The report, which looked at the earnings of women with and without children from 1993 to 2004, also highlights the consequences of government decisions to steer away from pay equity, establish a national child-care program and improve unemployment insurance and other benefits for women, according to gender equality experts who predict the problem will only worsen in the current economic climate.

Mothers who are highly educated earn less than childless women with similar degrees of education, the report found. But the wage gap between less-educated mothers and childless women with similar amounts of education is far less evident. The only significant gap existed among those between the ages of 27 and 34.

A possible explanation is that highly educated women have careers that require specialized skills, said Xuelin Zhang, senior research analyst in Statistics Canada's Income Statistics Division and report author.

When they leave the work force to have children, they may lose some of those skills or have difficulty catching up to those who didn't have an extended interruption in working, Mr. Zhang said.

Women without a university education, however, are more likely to be in jobs that don't have a high skill requirement, which means they don't face as big a learning curve when they return to work.

But one law professor said the demands of family life mean many university-educated mothers are forced to leave high-paying, demanding careers for part-time work or jobs that pay less but offer shorter hours, more benefits and security. "It's a huge burden for women," said Kathleen Lahey, a professor in the Queen's University Faculty of Law who does work on gender analysis.

Adopting strong pay-equity legislation could help blunt the impact of the wage gap mothers experience, according to Sue Calhoun, president of the Canadian Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs.

But an even bigger issue may be the fact that Canada doesn't have a national child-care program, which means spaces are often costly and hard to find, Prof. Lahey said. In some situations, that means women step away from their careers to stay at home or take jobs with reduced pay, while men assume the role of primary breadwinner.

It's a reality that helps to explain why so many Canadians are having children later and reducing the number of children they have, she said. "It's really quite out of date to think that people are just going to have an unlimited number of children without regard to the cost," Prof. Lahey said.

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