

Think of child care as infrastructure [CA]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Across Canada, stimulus spending is set to go into high gear. The federal government has authorized the government to spend \$3 billion as quickly as possible to quick-start some of the total \$40 billion in stimulus spending. For its part, Quebec has promised \$15 billion and Ontario, \$27.5 billion.

What will all this money be spent on? On roads, schools, hospitals, public transit, worker training, and support for businesses.

Here's what it won't be spent on: A national day-care program, pay equity and improved employment-insurance benefits that would help women. (Now, only a third of unemployed women qualify for EI, because the rules require a high number of hours worked, making it harder for part-timers to qualify.)

The point of a stimulus-spending program is to ensure that money keeps flowing through the economy, that jobs are maintained, workers keep producing, and goods continue to be purchased. There is nothing to say these goals can be achieved only by building bridges and refurbishing university buildings.

A day-care network is economic infrastructure in the same way that high-speed Internet is, and both are necessary to the smooth running of the Canadian economy. Quebec alone of the provinces understands this.

The Harper government could have used the economic crisis as an opportunity to acknowledge the role that Canadian women play in the country's economy and their need for supportive infrastructure. If the government's stimulus goal is to put to work people who will spend what they earn, why aren't childcare workers expected to spend just as fast as welders?

The tangible benefits of supplying an infrastructure for Canada's 7.2 million female workers are just as real as having freshly renovated university labs.

First and foremost, studies show that more support means there will be more children, which in turn means, to be crassly utilitarian about it, that Canada wouldn't need to go scouring the world for more than the 240,000 immigrants it admits every year.

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Canada's low birth rate has been a source of worry to economists for years. The rate improved in 2006 to 1.59, though still well below the replacement birth rate of 2.1 children per woman.

It is not a question of women not wanting children, said Sue Calhoun, president of the Canadian Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, in an interview from New Brunswick.

Calhoun has done research in N.B. which shows that women generally wanted more children than they felt they could afford.

"In New Brunswick," she said, "the number of child-care spaces for children up to age 4 meets only 13 per cent of the demand." she said.

But not only are women not having as many children as they would like. A new Statistics Canada report suggests that the women might also be curtailing their participation in the labour force when they have even two children.

According to the study, highly educated women experience the largest drop in income -- an average of 12 per cent for women with two children -- when they have children, a fact that suggests they feel they need to cut back on their work.

In an interview with the *Globe and Mail*, Kathleen Lahey, a Queen's University law professor, said that many university-educated women, to fulfil family obligations, must leave well-paid careers for jobs that offer greater flexibility and shorter hours along with reduced pay. "It's a huge burden for women," she was quoted as saying.

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In other words, people in highly skilled occupations should be treated like the precious resource that they are, not left on their own to struggle when they decide to start a family.

"What this wage gap between women with children and women without means is that women are still taking a greater share of responsibility for child care," said Calhoun.

"Other than in Quebec, we don't live in a particularly family-friendly country," said Calhoun. "We do not have the support systems that are needed."

- reprinted from the Ottawa Citizen

Region: Canada ^[2]

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