

Childcare 'patchwork' not enough: YWCA ^[1]

Long waits for childcare spaces 'makes no sense in a country like Canada,' CEO says

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EXCERPTS.

The federal government needs to lead a national child-care program for the sake of Canada's economic prosperity, the YWCA said in a new report released Monday.

Women have advanced in the workforce and more child care spaces are needed to catch up to that progress and to ensure that women can contribute even further to the economy, the organization's CEO said.

"We're adding to the economic prosperity for Canada. In fact, without our participation, I dare say that Canada would not be as prosperous as it is, yet the need for a national child-care program is really lagging behind the times and it's out-of-step with the reality of women's lives and that of families," Paulette Senior said in an interview.

The report, titled "Educated, Employed and Equal: The Economic Prosperity Case for National Child Care," was released a day in advance of International Women's Day.

It says men and women now participate in the workforce in virtually equal numbers and that the employment rate for women with children under five years old is 66.5 per cent. But there is an "inadequate patchwork" of child care services that does not offer choice for mothers in the paid workforce, according to the YWCA.

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Election issue?

The YWCA report comes as the federal political parties are bracing for a possible spring election in which the child-care debate would likely be revived.

The Liberals have said a pan-Canadian learning strategy will be part of their next platform and that will include early childhood education and care, though the party has not released any details of that plan. The NDP wants Ottawa to provide funding to the provinces for non-profit universal child-care services, and the party is calling for legislation to enshrine access to child-care in law.

The Conservative government, however, has never been keen on creating a national child-care services program. When Prime Minister Stephen Harper won the 2006 election, he scrapped agreements between the previous Liberal government and the provinces on funding for child-care spaces. His party instead introduced the Universal Child Care Plan, a benefit worth \$100 per month per child under six years old and a promise to create new child care spaces.

Senior says that while the child care benefit cheques are certainly helpful for families, "it's not child care."

Human Resources Minister Diane Finley defended her government's actions on the child-care file in a statement.

"Our Conservative government believes that parents, not the government, know best when it comes to raising their children. That is why we are providing choice in child care," she said. Finley also challenged the opposition parties to say how much their child-care plans would cost.

The YWCA maintains that the Conservatives still need to lead a national effort to broaden child-care services so that women have the social infrastructure required to allow them to participate in the workforce.

"The path to gender equality is really the path to prosperity and we know that if the government is really serious about providing choice to parents they need to close the social policy gap that currently exists," said Senior.

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