

# Think child care is no longer a women's issue? <sup>[1]</sup>

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*On this International Women's Day, think again....*

*Here are ten indications that Canada's lack of action on universal child care continues to have a profound impact on women in all regions of Canada-- across the life span, across diverse groups and across the economic spectrum:*

1. If "child care is the ramp that provides equal access to the workforce for mothers"<sup>\*\*</sup>, Canadian women are on a slippery slope. Although the majority of women with children are in the paid labour force in Canada (about 75% of mothers of three year olds), access to child care is limited and more-or-less static. There are child care spaces to cover less than 20% of 0-12 year olds and for families with infants, toddlers, children with disabilities, in rural and Aboriginal communities, it is even less available.

At the current slow rate of growth, it will take more than 50 years to grow the supply of child care to cover all children. And access to child care can only get worse, as the child population is again growing. Data from the 2011 census show that the 0-4 year old cohort is increasing at the highest rate in 50 years, up 11% between 2006 and 2011.

"Access" also means affordability, that is, parents need to be able to pay for child care. As public dollars for child care are limited in most of Canada, child care programs rely mostly on parent fees. As a result, the median fee for a two year old Canada-wide is \$700 a month (with a range from \$152 a month in Quebec to \$1600/month or even more in some cities).

2. **Statistics Canada data show that there is still a hefty wage gap between men and women.** This means that women need to work longer and harder than men to earn the same dollar while the data show that having children further exacerbates the gap. A recent Statistics Canada survey shows women earning only 75% of men's earnings. If all employed men and women (not just full-year, full-time workers are included), the gap is even bigger, with women earning only 69% of all men's wages.

Women with children earned even less-- 12%-20% less-- than women without children.

3. **Single mothers are overrepresented in poverty numbers.** According to a study published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, "women on their own are the poorest of the poor", especially lone-parent mothers-- almost five times more likely to be poor than mothers in two parent families. The data show that not only are lone parent mothers more likely to be poor but if they're employed, they're more likely to be working at low-wage, insecure jobs with few benefits.

Their child care predicament--how to access affordable, reliable, quality child care if you have limited personal resources -- creates a major barrier for low income single mothers trying to get the education or training they need to access good jobs or--if employed-- pursue advancement.

4. To fill some of the gaps created by the absence of a real child care system, the federal government still encourages **low income women from abroad** to come to Canada to provide low waged, gendered, private child (and elder) care. Government programs have brought women from other countries to Canada since the early 1900s to do domestic labour for advantaged families in exchange for promises of permanent residency, most recently through the **Live-in Caregiver Program**. Since 2006, between 9,000 and 14,000 live-in caregivers (primarily from the Philippines) came to Canada each year to work in circumstances that activists have called 'modern-day slavery' because of the low wages, unfair and unprotected working conditions.

**5. Women are overrepresented in part time and low wage work.** Statistics Canada data show that part-time workers are predominantly women who hold more service, low wage and part time jobs; almost 70% of part timers are women. A key reason given for women's part time work status is "caring for children", accounting for 35% of part timers. Additionally, studies show that precarious (insecure, short-term, casual or seasonal) employment--a growing concern in Canada-- is gendered, as unstable, unprotected jobs are increasingly held by women, especially racialized women, new immigrants and single parents.

**6. Unpaid care work**--in the home, for children and elderly parents-- is still far from being shared equally between men and women; work in the home, with children and with other family members is still disproportionately the responsibility of women. According to a 2010 Statistics Canada study, women spend more than twice the time than do men on unpaid child care. Women also spend much more time--an average of 13.8 hours/week-- on domestic chores ("housework") than do men, who spend an average 8.3 hours/week.

When it comes to taking time off work to spend taking care of newborns, only 30% of fathers in Canada took parental leave (which may be shared between mothers and fathers). In Quebec, which has introduced an earmarked five week paid "father leave", 80% of new fathers took the leave.

**7. Women--especially women on their own--are more vulnerable to poverty later in life.** The Conference Board of Canada points out that poverty rates among the elderly are highest among women. According to a study by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 14% of older women on their own are low income; this group is thirteen times more likely to be poor than older women in families. This study points to a combination of women's absence from the workforce/career paths, low wages, lack of private pensions and savings, together with inadequate public policy regarding retirement income which don't compensate for women's lower lifetime earnings.

**8. Canadian women are still under-represented in 'powerful' positions** such as academia, corporate boards, senior management and government. A study by the Council of Canadian Academies found that women are 1/3 of full-time university faculty but only 21.7% of full professors; it identifies child care as remaining "women's biggest challenge in academia". Women are scarce in corporate boardrooms too, with Canada's proportion of women on corporate boards one of the lowest in the OECD and among senior managers, only 32% were women in 2009.

According to the Globe and Mail, women only make up about one quarter of Members of Parliament. Canada is now ranked 52 among countries with regard to the number of women in elected office. The United Nations women's program recommends using quotas to boost the number of women legislators, to "ensure that women are in parliaments, on the front-line of justice, and represented in the judiciary and customary justice systems to help women access their rights".

**9. Caring labour continues to be undervalued and exploited whether it's in a child care centre or a private home.** The low wages and poor working conditions of most early childhood educators continues to be an issue that plagues the early childhood field in Canada. Taking care of and educating young children is still archetypal 'women's work' and, as the Canadian Women's Foundation notes, "the more a job is considered 'women's work,' the less it pays." Recent data from a 2012 survey by the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council found that 98.2% of centre staff and directors were women and that program staff still earned only 69% of the average wage for all occupations. Low pay and few benefits undervalue the work of taking care of our youngest children, discourage both women and men from entering the field, and diminish the quality of child care programs.

**10. Limited child care support wastes woman-resources (as well as public resources).** Today Canadian women are excelling in post-secondary education; in 2008 women made up 60% of university undergraduates, 54% of Masters graduates and 44% of PhD graduates. Yet inadequate funding for child care creates the kinds of child care "choices" that plague today's young women such as one recently announced by the City of Ottawa: graduate and professional student-mothers will be bumped from the lengthy child care fee subsidy wait list as "less deserving" than untrained applicants or undergraduates. Inadequate funding for child care also means that women who are new immigrants in Canada are unable to participate in English or French language training, upgrade foreign credentials or learn new skills.

Lack of child care is a barrier to participation in all kinds of education and training--essential for women's equality. Access to child care--though often construed as a support to women's employment--is just as important for women who are students and trainees at all levels, from language classes, to high school, to apprenticeships, to aspiring lawyers and engineers, and doctors.

*So-- if anyone tells you that there's no need for a women's movement because issues that feminists fought for are "solved" or that child care "isn't a women's issue"--tell them that they're plain wrong.*

*And on International Women's Day 2013, let's resolve to keep on fighting for universal child care until all women can "have it all".*

- Martha Friendly & Shani Halfon, Childcare Resource and Research Unit, March 2013

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\*This quote comes from the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment (1984) headed by Supreme Court of Canada Justice Rosalie Abella, to whom it is usually attributed

#### Tags:

economics <sup>[4]</sup>

poverty <sup>[5]</sup>

gender <sup>[6]</sup>

demographics <sup>[7]</sup>

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