# What does universal child-care mean for working women? [1]

**Author:** Mojtehedzadeh, Sara
**Source:** Toronto Star [2]
**Format:** Article
**Publication Date:** 26 Oct 2014

EXCERPTS

When it comes to child care, the Nordic example of universal support is touted so often that you'd be forgiven for developing a severe bout of Swedish-success-story fatigue.

But as Ontario reviews its child-care options in the wake of this week's Ombudsman report - and as the country considers the NDP's proposed national child-care policy - it's worth reflecting on the impact on working mothers, who most often must choose between work and home.

And so, to Sweden.

First, some assumptions: Most research takes for granted that having more working mothers is a good thing. Women are more educated than ever, and want commensurate employment. Full-time work means greater economic independence for women and a bigger tax base for government.
That premise isn't granted by all. Mothers often choose to work part-time or not at all, for a variety of complex personal and social reasons. Many enter the workforce out of economic necessity, not because they relish juggling workplace and household responsibilities.

But mothers in Ontario and Canada are increasingly choosing to maintain their careers after childbirth, notes Paulette Senior, CEO of YWCA Canada. Canada already enjoys a relatively high rate of maternal employment: about 73 per cent of mothers work; in Ontario the figure is around 76 per cent.

But OECD figures show that there is still a gap between female employment and maternal employment nationwide - a gap Senior says is "absolutely" due to the lack of affordable child care.

"We know that despite women's participation increasing, their ability to be full participants is still being hampered in terms of the types of jobs that they're able to take or even the roles that their male partners are playing in the home," she says.

OECD figures provide a closer look at the connection between accessible child-care and working moms. The five developed economies with the highest percentage of working mothers - Iceland, Slovenia, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands - also boast comprehensive national child-care programs. These countries show a negligible gap between the percentage of women working and the percentage of mothers working. The top four have both female and maternal employment rates of more than 80 per cent.

For Nordic countries, affordability is king. Places like Denmark and Sweden have maximum caps on how much parents pay for child care. In Sweden, for example, parents do not pay more than 3 per cent of their income to place a child in licensed care. In Canada, total child-care costs eat up almost 30 per cent of our average wage - compared to 7 per cent in Sweden and 11 per cent in Denmark.
For variety, consider tiny Slovenia. Despite being neither Nordic nor particularly wealthy, Slovenia has the second-highest maternal employment rate in the OECD. At least 84 per cent of its women with children are in the workforce. Slovenia's GDP is a fraction of the size of Ontario's but almost 90 per cent of children between the ages of 3 and 6 are accommodated by the country's universal early education system.

In Europe, universal child-care programs are "investments that were begun when it was recognized that women's employments could and should increase," says Professor Jane Jenson, a senior fellow at the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research who analyzes social policy in Canada and the European Union.

"The response was to provide the conditions under which women and families would feel comfortable about leaving their children in care, and so the emphasis was on building affordable and accessible child care"

One of the most powerful examples of the link between affordable child care and maternal employment does not lie across an ocean. It sits right beside us - in Quebec.

According to research compiled by Pierre Fortin, a professor of economics at the University of Montreal, up to 86 per cent of mothers have now joined Quebec's labour force, one of the highest participation rates in the country. Single mothers in particular were significantly more likely to look for work as a result of universal child-care, and were significantly less likely to be poor. (It's no coincidence that Fortin was on hand to answer questions when NDP leader Thomas Mulcair revealed his party's child-care policy - one million new $15-a-day spaces - to the nation).

None of this addresses one of the greatest political bugaboos of the child-care debate: Do the tax benefits of having more mothers in the

workforce offset the cost of subsidizing a universal system?

Fortin argues yes, that the public investment gets a great return.

"In 2008 in Quebec, we estimated that the two levels of government pocketed $900 million over and above the additional cost it incurred by going universal. The universal system has this advantage of leaving provincial and federal governments with more money that could be invested in helping low income families."

...

Read the full story online at the Toronto Star [2]
**Region:** Canada [3]
**Tags:** mother's labour force participation [4]

---