

A mother's burden: Women still do the heavy lifting in raising kids^[1]

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EXCERPTS

It took a quip by Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne to make me look up from my laptop and realize there was barely a man in sight.

"It's great to be in a room full of women, with a few male allies," Wynne told the ChildCare2020 conference in Winnipeg last week.

"I spend a lot of time in rooms full of men, lovely as they are. I just want to acknowledge how important the work is you do. And it is women doing this work. We cannot pretend that that's not the case."

Crowded around tables and squeezed into the corners of the Fort Garry Hotel's grand ballroom were 600 women worried about child care. They were moms who spoke about the struggles finding day care that matched their shift-work schedules. They were early-childhood educators who spoke candidly about the crap wages they're paid. They were stalwarts in the fight for quality child care such as Manitoba's Pat Wege.

At one point, representatives from every province made quick PowerPoint presentations about the state of affairs in their hometowns. All were women.

Sure, there were a handful of men sprinkled among the 600, and NDP Leader Tom Mulcair did speak at the conference.

But for the most part, the men who were there were hired photographers or officials from the unions who sponsored the conference, just as often as they were dads or male daycare workers or advocates.

This is intuitively what I'd expect. To see it so starkly was jarring.

My colleague Mia Rabson and I are starting work on a daycare series, and last week we asked readers to send us their experiences and ideas (please keep those emails coming, by the way). All but one of the dozen or so emails we received were from women.

Readers described the hours spent on the phone trying to score a spot, the research and paperwork, even the cheerful, "spontaneous" drop-ins they made to good daycares, hoping staff would like and remember them when a spot opened. They also described the panic that set in a few weeks before their maternity leaves were up and no child-care spot had materialized.

One woman, the mother of twins, started systematically scouting around for two infant spaces when she was just seven weeks pregnant. Not a hope in heck, she was repeatedly told. So, she has now taken another year off work, away from a great job, to care for her twins.

Of course, many men help their partners with the constant battle for good child care. And we've seen a huge increase in the number of men taking parental leave - one in five, at Statistics Canada's last count.

But typically, it's women who bear most of the child care burden, who delay their return to work, who rejig their business schedules, who see their pensionable earnings shrink and their climb up the corporate ladder stall.

And that's the crux. Daycare is certainly an issue of women's equality, which is probably why it's taken years to get much national traction, even though, confoundingly, women cast ballots at slightly higher rates than men and they are coveted voters.

It's finally happening, thanks in part to a pre-election pledge by Mulcair to create a national daycare system and Prime Minister Stephen Harper's rival pledge to boost the monthly child-care benefit. But child care is also an economic issue, plain and simple. Keeping people whose education we've invested in, whose skills we need, whose taxes help fix our roads, from meaningful jobs they enjoy is economic self-sabotage.

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