

Put child care, women's health on the political agenda ^[1]

Opinion

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EXCERPTS

Alberta has a child-care crisis affecting the health and well-being of women, children living with a disability and the safety of children in general, and it is crucial to brief politicians on this. The crisis is caused by the limited availability of child-care services resulting in long wait-lists; high costs which limit access to poor and middle-income families; privatization of child-care services, leaving the services to the dictates of the market; continuous rise of unregulated centres, which can endanger children's health and safety as we have seen recently in Alberta; and the subtle discrimination against, and expulsion of, children with disability or special needs in some centres.

There are more than 300 families on a two- to three-year wait-list, according to Sue MacLean of the Oliver Centre Early Learning Program, as reported by Emily Mertz in Global News online. A 2014 Public Interest Alberta (PIA) survey finds that 63 per cent of child-care centres have wait-lists. In order to get ahead of competitors, women now have to seek out child-care services before or soon after becoming pregnant. In a Calgary Metro article, Calgary mom Tabitha David said she was torn between paying for child care and quitting her job. If she continued working, her daily earnings after child-care costs would be \$5.

This story is replicated across Canada: There are currently regulated child-care facilities for only half the 1.9 million children under the age of five with two working parents; pre-kindergarten classes account for a small portion of those left behind, leaving 361,000 children without child care, according to a recent report co-authored by Kate McInturff and David MacDonald for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA).

The plight of children with special needs makes the situation more critical. In Alberta, 62 per cent of child-care service providers (including child-care centres, day homes and after-school care centres) who responded to the PIA survey acknowledged they refused to accept children with special needs. In a study on the state of inclusion of children with special needs in child-care programs in Alberta led by Lesley Wiart, the researchers found 36 per cent of child-care centres and 29 per cent of day homes had refused to accept children with disabilities. Moreover, 40 per cent of the day homes and 36 per cent of the child-care centres did not know how to access professional support services for children in their centres. This study also highlights the problem of physical accessibility: 54 per cent of the child-care centres and 96 per cent of the day homes were physically inaccessible.

Children, including those with special needs and disabilities, need access to safe and healthy child-care services, a supportive environment conducive to playing, learning and positive child development. Children can end up in unregulated centres due to limited spaces and high costs. Recently, there were reports of alleged sexual assaults on two children at two Calgary day homes. Incidents of this nature increase the anxiety of many parents with children in child-care centres. The crisis can end women's careers, has a negative impact on women's health and well-being, and lowers the quality of life for families. Single mother Karolyn Slowsky, featured in the Edmonton Journal in November 2014, revealed she was dependent on antidepressants due to the debilitating anxiety of finding someone to care for her son with high-functioning autism.

Experts often highlight the economic benefits of effective child-care policies. Whether the solutions are high-quality child care available at subsidized costs, publicly funded child-care services, or generally upgraded family policies that level the field between men and women, substantive policies arguably can improve the economy by increasing women's participation in the workforce with ensuing increases in revenues.

However persuasive the economic argument for reform of child-care services is, one would hope that necessary policy changes will be implemented not because they make economic sense to do so, but because they are simply the right thing to do: the human rights thing to do. Resolving the child-care crisis — a key part of women's struggle for gender equality whether at home, at the workplace, or in the public sphere — is, and should be, more than just a matter of numbers. Certainly more than a political calculus focused on a narrow political base. Equity has value in and of itself: health and personal well-being.

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Region: Alberta ^[3]

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