# One way to support Canadian families this campaign? Make life easier for single moms [1]

**Author:** Anderssen, Erin
**Source:** Globe and Mail
**Format:** Article
**Publication Date:** 1 Oct 2015

AVAILABILITY
Access online [2]

Excerpt

Viveca Ellis drove into the poverty wall, as she puts it, on an ugly, grey Vancouver afternoon. University-educated, with a loving family, she hadn't expected that. At the time, she was living with friends, working a cleaning job to get by until she could find something better, and leaving her son with a babysitter who was barely making ends meet herself.

Ellis figured she was taking home $2 an hour – not nearly enough to change her circumstances. "We were two women and one little boy among thousands, trapped in a culture of poverty created by low-wage work and unregulated child care in B.C.," she explained in a heartbreaking speech given in Vancouver last November at a press conference on child poverty.

A few months later, with her son in his stroller, she sat in the nearest welfare office, filling out forms. "Single motherhood is a kind of poverty-equalizer among women," she says. "The deck is stacked against us all in so many ways."

There hasn't been much room to discuss that stacked deck, for all the long weeks the politicians have been stumping the campaign trail. This is the Election That Forgot Poor People, squarely devoted to the middle class. Between stimulus spending, income-splitting, and tax breaks for housing renovations and Rotary Club memberships, the single mom who can't afford a home (let alone new kitchen counters) and has no spousal income to split, sits on the sidelines, hoping, at least, for a smaller child-care bill.

Aside from a long-overdue child-care conversation, what's still been largely missing from this campaign is a substantive debate about family policies that continue to implicitly (and explicitly) favour wealthier, two-parent families. Or how to improve pay equity and reduce domestic violence. Or the fact that more than 25 years after Parliament vowed to end child poverty, Canada is no further ahead in this goal, and may even be, according to a 2014 report by Campaign 2000, slipping behind. At the heart of that policy failure is the household headed by a single mother, the Canadian family most likely to be poor. Helping her spills out in social and economic benefits, not just for the country, but for all families struggling on a thin bottom line.

Approximately one in five Canadian children is being raised by a single mom. Although median earnings have roughly doubled for single mothers to $29,000 since the mid-1990s (along with the rise of women's pay overall), they still earn one-third the earnings of couples with kids, and less than two-thirds that of single dads. (With taxes and government transfers, their take-home is about half that of two-parent families.)

They also tend to be the hardest hit during a recession; according to a report by the Centre for Policy Alternatives, of all parents, single mothers with children under 6 experienced the largest increase in unemployment, from 11 per cent in prerecession 2007 to a high of 17 per cent in 2010.

Lifting the fortunes of single mothers, and their children, is a worthy stimulus project on its own, as a Canadian study demonstrated this spring.

In the study, researchers followed more than 500 single-mother families living in London, Ont., for 14 years, as their children became adults. Two factors made a difference in those families: a stable home life (that is, when the mother remained single over the years of the study) and the mother's postsecondary education. In those cases, the children of single moms didn't just reach the level of education and occupation as kids from two-parent families, they often surpassed them.

"More attention should be paid to addressing disparities in education and family income than concerns about the kind of families kids grow up in," says the study's lead author, Jamie Seabrook.

College or university credentials only increase the chances of landing secure, well-paying jobs (with health benefits and even pensions), which improve a family's bottom line, and its stress load, in the short term, and set poor kids up for their own education goals in the long term.

"If I prioritized, education would be right at the top," Seabrook says. "The far-reaching benefits down the road are going to be enormous."

A new program established in September by the British Columbia government is one to watch: The province will provide tuition for one-year programs with a focus on high-demand jobs and cover child-care and transportation expenses both during the year of study and the first year of work. All single parents in B.C. who are on social or disability assistance are eligible. It's estimated to cost $24.5-million over five years, although the province has placed no cap on the number of participants.

Janet Austin, the CEO of the YWCA Metro Vancouver, which is already helping a dozen candidates enroll in the new program, says investing in single mothers – with "social infrastructure" such as affordable child care and housing – needs to be seen as an economic step to reducing child poverty. "That's part of the shift we need to make in society."

Wanted: Equal tax policy for all parents

You can't blame politicians for focusing on the majority, the ever-iconic middle-class, two-parent family. These are the people who vote. Handing out tax breaks to them like Halloween candy isn't controversial, and for the Conservatives, in particular, who have a base of "traditional families" to placate, it's necessary. It doesn't help that only 30 per cent of single parents made it to the polls in the most recent election, half the rate of couples with kids the same age. Part of this is income – poorer Canadians vote at lower rates overall – but also, it's harder to stand in line at the polls while juggling kids alone.

This a case of omission rather than derision, and nothing near so pernicious as in the United States, where single moms are routinely blamed for every sort of evil: gun violence, low test scores, general societal decay. But there's still an implicit bias built into our family policy – and what's on offer this election – when you look at who benefits most: wealthier, middle-class households with two salaries or one big breadwinner with a stay-at-home spouse. Take a hint, single moms: Find a man.

The last thing Amanda McKay, 30, wants is the wrong choice of partner to add to her financial burdens, even as she struggles with the isolation that comes with being a Vancouver single mom on social assistance. "I have considered buying a fake ring," she says. "I feel ashamed a lot of the time." A combination of events led her here: a difficult childhood spent bouncing between foster homes, an overwhelming student loan from her commerce degree, being laid off from her job as a logistics co-ordinator for a transportation company, an ex-boyfriend who, until a recent court order, wasn't providing child support. She is now trying to return to school to get more professional credentials, without falling more into debt, and saving for a car to expand her job options and help her juggle child-care pickups for her son, now 20 months old.

"I don't think I need two incomes to raise my son to be happy," she says – just a fair shot. She knows her education and resourcefulness give her an edge, a chance to avoid a life of low-wage jobs, dangling on the edge of poverty. "I don't want to be here forever."

That fair shot, according to Ellis, requires lifting the stigma that follows single mothers. "The perception is that a family led by a single parent is broken," she says, speaking also as chair of the board for the Single Mothers' Alliance of B.C., a new advocacy group which led a successful campaign to stop the B.C. government from clawing back child-support payments from single parents on social assistance. Having a degree helped her leave social assistance after a year – she now works on contract as a non-profit fundraiser – but the experience made her more aware of the ways the system works against single moms, especially those who grew up in poverty. Tax policy, she says, should treat all parents equally – in her words, the state has no business in the "family rooms" of the nation.

The most explicit example that excludes single parents is income splitting for families with children, promised by the Conservatives, which allows one working parent to reduce their tax bill by "giving" some of their income to their partner. The policy is being sold as an attempt to balance the tax burden for families with one parent at home, but, as the Parliamentary Budget Officer reported in March, it will cost a whopping $2.2-billion and have "near zero" impact on low-income families, while disproportionately benefiting higher-income households.

Other policies tacitly assume there are two parents involved in the raising of a child: Maternity-leave options are more limited for single mothers, who are more likely to work part-time and less likely to have jobs with employer top-ups that make a year off affordable. (Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau has promised to work with provinces to expand leaves to up to 18 months, but it's not clear how low-income families who can't afford 12 months could possibly take advantage of another six.)

A lack of good maternity leave means, for instance, that single mothers are more likely to leave the work force entirely when they have kids, making it harder to get back into the job market later. That's compounded when they face the cost of child care, which the Universal Child Care Benefit cheques from Ottawa, even with recent increases, don't come close to covering.

One key election issue affecting single mothers has been child care, with a clear choice between the NDP $15-a-day-plan, the Liberals offering direct family subsidies on a sliding scale and the Conservatives sticking with their current benefits.

Making child care affordable is certainly a good step, Ellis says. But it also has to be accessible, so that single parents aren't grappling with transportation issues or work schedules that fall outside 9 to 5. A Toronto study, for instance, found that single-parent families – which account for 17 per cent of households in the city – were disadvantaged when it came to jobs because of a lack of car or public transportation and the time of a commute. The easiest access to jobs are in the downtown core – though few single mothers live there. (Both the Liberals and the NDP made promises this month to invest in affordable housing.)

And while urban mothers have wider options for low-paying jobs, rural moms face their own complicated logistics. Illness or disability only increase the barriers to work, leaving single mothers – who report high rates of stress and symptoms of depression twice as high as married or common-law mothers – with less access to employee benefits that provide some coverage, for instance, to a psychologist and other professionals.

Poverty is a layer cake of complications: transportation, child care, food bills, low-wage labour, especially in female-dominated jobs, and

housing. Melissa Holliday, 24, an single mother from Ottawa with two preschoolers, is currently trying to move out of the rough neighbourhood where she lives on social housing. She doesn't feel safe there and she's worried about her kids. Holliday, an active member of ACORN, a group that helps low-income Canadians advocate for themselves, wants to go back to school and become an aesthetician. But right now, she says, she would set those plans aside to take a job just to cover rent in a better apartment. "Every day, there is something difficult that I have to overcome," she says.

Research shows that in countries with a broad package of family-neutral policies – better parental-leave benefits, wider access to child care – the circumstances of single-mothers and their children, look more like their two-parent counterparts. In Sweden, for instance, the risk of poverty for single moms hovers at 2 per cent – about 10 times lower than Canada. Why this continues to be true is a question that politicians should be expected to answer.

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**Links**

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