

On International Women's Day, the need for national child care is more pressing than ever: Editorial ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

How long have Canadian women been demanding a national child care program? And how long have politicians been promising it?

Far, far too long.

On this International Women's Day it's still conspicuously absent from the national agenda – despite royal commissions and task forces calling for such a plan for the past four and a half decades.

Indeed, it's been 10 years since the last serious push for such a program ended with the election of Stephen Harper's Conservatives. They killed off an ambitious plan by the Liberals of Paul Martin to launch a \$5.4-billion national child-care program.

The result? The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development has ranked Canada dead last out of 25 states for the quality and accessibility of its child care.

No single move by governments would make such a big difference in the lives of women and families as a comprehensive national plan to provide quality, affordable child care. On the day set aside to mark women's achievements, and the barriers that keep them from making even more progress, it's worth remembering that.

Unfortunately, there's little sign that significant progress will come any time soon. Child care was not exactly front and centre in last year's election campaign. The New Democrats promised to bring in a national, subsidized program, but the Liberals took a much more cautious approach.

They promised only to begin work with provinces, territories and Indigenous communities on a "new National Early Learning and Child Care Framework" with the aim of delivering "affordable, high-quality, flexible and fully inclusive child care for Canadian families."

Even with all that hedging, the Liberal government hasn't met its campaign promise. It pledged to start work on developing the "framework" in the first 100 days of its mandate, now past. Still, it would be good to see some mention of at least the planning stages for it in the government's first budget, to be introduced on March 22.

The case for national child care remains as strong as ever. Consider that 75 per cent of mothers of young children are in the workforce, but licenced day care spots exist for just 22 per cent of children under 5. It's even tougher for parents trying to get their child into a subsidized day care spot. In Toronto alone there are almost 12,000 eligible children in the queue.

And consider the costs to families. Last year a study from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives found that average families with two children in Toronto were paying a staggering 48 per cent of their after-tax income on child care.

And that's families whose parents can find child care so they can go out and work. Others — think of single mums — who can't find care simply can't work. Their economic prospects are even grimmer.

It's not just parents who are losing out. A TD Bank study found that for every \$1 invested in child care, provincial governments receive \$1.50 in increased tax revenues.

And then there's the cost to the children themselves. Early childhood education reduces inequalities that result from poverty. And it decreases the number of children in special education classes by identifying problems and intervening early. Indeed, the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada concluded that the lack of affordable child care was putting the health and well-being of children at risk.

Women and families have been waiting for decades for real progress towards comprehensive national child care. The Trudeau government has pushed forward on many fronts since it took power in early November, but child care isn't one of them.

On International Women's Day, especially, the politicians should remember that this remains one of the country's biggest unmet social needs and resolve to make it a real priority.

Why? As the prime minister might put it, "because it's 2016."

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