

International Women's Day adds momentum to the call for universal child care ^[1]

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Source: Huffington Post Canada

Format: Article

Publication Date: 10 Mar 2016

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

In the wake of another International Women's Day (IWD), I'm celebrating child care.

No, you didn't miss the memo. There was no announcement. No bold political decision. No "because it's 2015" moment. But there is something to celebrate nonetheless.

I'm celebrating because for the first time, there is tangible momentum and a critical mass behind the movement to bring affordable child care to all Canadians.

And here's what is different about IWD this year: during the 2015 election campaign, hundreds of thousands of Canadians spent months hearing and talking about child care -- one of the most pressing issues facing women and families in Canada today.

This is not something that happens every year.

On top of being a day where we stop to recognize, remember and celebrate the lives of women who changed history, IWD has also become a day when newspaper editorials, think-tanks, unions and political parties take time to remind Canadians what women experience every single day. This year many highlighted the fact that child care is inaccessible and financially crippling for families.

Today's child care costs are astronomical and rising. They put enormous strain on households, including young families, and make it more difficult for women to participate in the paid work force. For decades there has been little political response to the challenge, despite demands for action.

But today, each call to action becomes more credible than the last, with economists, feminists, educators, and every day Canadians demanding we rectify Canada's poor national standing on child care.

We as a movement are more boldly challenging political leaders to change course. We are doing it by organizing -- door-to-door, over the phones and at events. And we are doing so by changing the established narrative and reframing the foundations of the argument.

Accessible, affordable universal child care is an affordability issue and also a gender and equality issue.

We know that universal childcare helps to reverse chronic gender inequity. In Quebec alone, widely available access to their very low-fee child care resulted in 70,000 women returning to the workforce -- a 3.8 per cent increase in women's employment. Giving women economic options and choices increases participation in the paid work force. Many women outside of Quebec simply do not have this choice.

On top of combatting gender inequality, a universal child-care system levels the playing field for families, helping to address the growing affordability challenges in Canada's cities.

In addition, study after study on early learning conclude that a socio-economically diverse learning environment boosts language and math skills not just for children from low-income families, but for children of all socioeconomic background. Supporting children from low-income families by starting them off on the same foot as their peers is simply a matter of fairness.

Affordable universal child care reverses inequality.

Armed with these facts and their own experience, more and more citizens and child care groups are demanding answers when politicians oppose a proven method to reverse inequality. We're demanding to know why they oppose a policy that would assist many thousands of women return to the workforce. We're demanding to know why they oppose offering a better start for our children.

And in the growing chorus of these demands is where we are building critical mass.

I had the honour in this past election of spending over 100 days talking about the state of child care in our country. Tom Mulcair's decision to run on a plan for universal, affordable child care was one of the main reasons I ran to become an NDP Member of Parliament. It was this bold vision that energized my peers and supporters.

Despite the disappointing results for New Democrats from last fall's campaign, I know that Tom's commitment to and push for affordable and accessible child care played a large part in elevating and amplifying the child care movement. As a progressive, I stand by Tom because of his unwavering commitment to a universal child-care system.

In fact, I consider it is a contradiction in terms to call oneself a progressive and oppose universal child care. This must be among the standards by which we will judge 'progressive' politics.

But after another IWD, we must celebrate that momentum is on our side. The child care movement in Canada is a growing endeavour.

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/international-womens-day> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/universality> [6]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/women>