

Women's opportunities hindered by lack of national childcare policy ^[1]

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During his 2015 campaign, Justin Trudeau made hundreds of promises to Canadian voters—one was the creation of a framework for a national childcare policy within the first 100 days of a Liberal government; however, more than four months after assuming office, Trudeau has not delivered on this promise. Alleviating the burden of child care will improve women's ability to access career opportunities. With Canada's gender wage gap of women to men remaining below 70 cents to the dollar—largely due to women working in part-time, temporary, and lower level jobs due to the demands of family care—the Liberal government needs to take action immediately. Despite the fact that subsidized child care has been offered to a limited extent in Canada with a relative degree of success, the government needs to look elsewhere for the model upon which they will base their national policy.

Currently, Quebec is the only province in Canada to offer a government subsidized child care program. The provincial government has been lauded for its forward-thinking initiative, which was established in fall 1997. Initially costing users a flat-rate of \$7 per child, per day, Quebec child care now comes at a cost of \$7.55 with an additional sliding-scale system tax for families with an income over \$50,545. Since its implementation, employment rate for Quebec women doubled, poverty rates dropped by 14 per cent, while the GDP rose by 1.7 per cent. Due to these successes, it has been promoted as the system which should be used throughout all of Canada. The Quebec system, however, has its fair share of shortcomings that cannot be overlooked. The issues that it has already experienced call into question its long-term viability, making it infeasible to implement, as is, at the national level.

While many are suggesting that Quebec's plan be implemented throughout every province, it is worrying to think about the effects that a mismanaged system implemented at the national level could have. A 2005 study of the quality of Quebec childcare facilities reported 61 per cent having an overall quality of "minimal," with 12 per cent rated as inadequate and 27 per cent as good. Additionally, it is individuals with higher incomes—over \$60,000—who reap the greatest benefits of low flat-rate childcare. A 2000 study showed that while these higher earning income families represented a minority of children in Quebec, they accounted for more than 58 per cent of children in subsidized child care centres. This demonstrates an inherent issue in the Quebec system, and an oversight in the quality of the programs that are being offered.

Rather than using the framework that has been in place in Quebec, Canada needs to look to other countries that have successfully implemented a national childcare policy over an extended period of time as examples of what is possible at the national level. Sweden, which established its childcare system more than 40 years ago, operates full-day subsidized child care facilities, with parental fees that are directly proportional to income, and inversely proportional to the number of children in a family. Fees are capped at 1,260 Swedish Krona (\$200 CAD) per month. By using a proportional scale, as opposed to Quebec's fixed-rate base fee, it makes childcare infinitely more accessible to all income levels. Sweden has seen this, with 55 per cent of children under three and 96 per cent of children between three and six enrolled in child care, which is well above the European Union's target for child care provisions. Consequently, Sweden's male and female employment rates are nearly equal, at 76.5 percent and 73.5 per cent, respectively, and the gender wage gap is below the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development average of 15 per cent—while Canada's is double that rate.

Sweden's method, which has clearly proven to be successful, needs to be the basis off of which Canada builds its framework. With its ability to offer both genders more equal employment opportunities, the implementation of a national child care policy is something that Canada cannot ignore or push back any longer.

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