



## **Child care—the ramp that provides equal access to the workforce for mothers<sup>1</sup>**

Brief prepared for  
House of Commons' Standing Committee on the Status of Women  
*Study on the economic leadership and prosperity of Canadian women*

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from (now) Judge Rosalie Abella (1984), *Royal Commission on Equality in Employment*

A universal child care program would have our vote absolutely today. Child care is one of the biggest barriers that women face coming into this industry. From the industry's perspective, we are asked every day, "You go away and figure out that child care problem and we'll hire more women." JudyLynn Archer, President and CEO of Women Building Futures, Edmonton (women in construction trades). Testimony to FEWO November 4, 2014.

## **Introduction**

This brief is presented to the House of Commons' Standing Committee on the Status of Women to contribute to the Committee's examination of the economic leadership and prosperity of Canadian women in the public sector, the private sector, and the not-for-profit sector.

The Toronto-based Childcare Resource and Research Unit (CRRU) has been a key actor in Canadian child care for three decades. We are a main knowledge mobilizer, providing information and resources about child care research and policy and are recognized in the early childhood education and childcare (ECEC) field for our role in ensuring that policy makers, advocates, service providers and other researchers are empowered by knowledge and that policy initiatives continue to be informed by a wide variety of information. One of CRRU's basic premises has been that good public policy is based on solid information that draws on multi-disciplinary research and policy analysis.

As part of our mandate to inform people about child care and related issues, CRRU had been following the testimony to the FEWO committee last spring and noted that child care and its relationship to the economic leadership and prosperity of Canadian women was referenced repeatedly by witnesses. The context for this brief is the Committee's intention to "examine in particular the societal and systemic challenges that undermine equality of opportunity and limit women's ability to become leaders".

Child care has been considered to be a women's issue in Canada for more than 40 years. When the Royal Commission on the Status of Women proposed a national day care Act in 1970, its main goal was women's equality. Since then, as additional goals (child development, for example) have become part of the debate, knowledge has expanded and the language has shifted. For this reason, what was called day care in the 1970s and child care in the 1980s/1990s is now often called early learning and care, or early childhood education and care.

Looking at child care from a women's perspective, we argue that poor access to quality child care is one of the main challenges that women across Canada face today. Statements such as the one that opens this brief (above), commenting on how poor access to child care "is one of the biggest barriers" preventing women from entering a well-paid, non-traditional line of work—construction trades—illustrates this well. It is the same, however, for women across the spectrum—women entrepreneurs and those working for NGOs, teachers, students, newcomers to Canada struggling to learn English or French, women farmers, lawyers and Members of Parliament.

Overall, Canada's lack of action on universal child care in every region of the country continues to have a profound impact on women's equality of opportunity and leadership chances in all regions of Canada—across the life span, across diverse groups and across the economic spectrum.

## The state of child care in Canada 2014

Although Canada is a wealthy country, its social support of women and children is less than robust. Forty-four years since the Royal Commission on the Status of Women first identified the need for a national child care program in 1970, in 2012 there were only enough child care spaces for 22.5% of Canadian children 0-5—more in some provinces, less in others (see Ferns & Friendly, 2014, Figure 2).

Although child care is central to most conceptions of how women are supported to be both workers (or students) and mothers, Canada has never had a national child care program or policy. Without a federal approach and only limited financial support, none the provinces/territories provides regulated child care for more than a minority. Each province/territory has its own child care program, providing regulated “spaces” in centres, regulated family child care and usually (part-day) nursery schools/preschools as well. These are supported by a variety of funding arrangements. Each jurisdiction also provides publicly-funded kindergarten, mostly for five-year-olds.

As none of the provinces/territories has a well-developed publicly-funded long-term plan for provision of high quality universal child care, it is not surprising that international reviews rank us at the bottom of affluent countries when it comes to access, quality and public funding (UNICEF, 2008).

Most regions of Canada experience child care “crisis” after crisis as the language describing child care across Canada has become almost hackneyed: patchwork, hodgepodge, piecemeal. There are severe shortages of places, especially for Indigenous and rural/remote communities, and non standard hours workers. Children with disabilities are frequently excluded, often because underfunded service providers cannot accommodate them. Underfunding and consequent high user fees put regulated child care out of reach for many families and threaten the financial viability of programs while there is widespread reliance on unregulated child care which occasionally turns out to be dangerous. It is, however often the only affordable and available option for many parents.

All regions report difficulty attracting and retaining qualified educators (almost all of whom are women) because the early childhood profession is not highly valued and pays poorly. Too often program quality is so weak that it that cannot be considered educational or developmental while service gaps and policy vacuums encourage expansion of for-profit, sometimes corporate big-box child care that research finds is likely to provide poorer quality and access. Child care and kindergarten—while a growing number of provinces now situate them in the same department—are still quite separated, not the integrated “strong and equal partnership” recommended by the experts. Universal kindergarten is only for five year olds in most of Canada and fails to recognize parents’ work schedules, as kindergartens operate only part-work-day and during the school year.

Canada’s reliance on a child care market—in which governments take limited responsibility—rather than a child care *system* is a key explanation for this persistent patchwork. Rather than building a coherent public system with long-term goals, planning, substantial public funding and public management, market forces and a consumerist approach shape, create, maintain, deliver and finance Canadian child care services. Federal and provincial/territorial child care policy encourages this dependence on markets, flying in the face of clear evidence that public management of child care, including public/non-profit delivery, is a much more effective and fair way to deliver services.

The commonly used international benchmark for public spending on early childhood education and child care (child care and kindergarten) is one percent of GDP, and some countries exceed this benchmark

(UNICEF, 2008). In contrast, Canada spent 0.25 percent of GDP on ECEC the last time these data were available (OECD, 2006). Growth in public funding has been very slow at best for almost a decade; between 2009/2010 and 2011/2012, public funding (adjusted for inflation) decreased in three provinces/ territories and increased only slightly in most others (Ferns & Friendly, 2014).

### **Women as mothers, women as workers**

For Canadian mothers of young children in 2014, an Ozzie-and-Harriet world isn't even a memory. Today's young mothers were born a whole generation after the era of black and white television sitcoms in the 1950s. In the mid 1980s, the percent of mothers who worked at paid employment became a majority. Since then, mothers' employment rate has risen quite steadily year by year, reaching 69.7% (w/youngest child 0-2 years), 76.6% (w/youngest child 3-5 years), and 84.0% (w/youngest child 6-15 years) in 2012 (Ferns & Friendly, 2014, see Figure 1).

As noted earlier, access to child care is limited by the supply of spaces and their high cost. Currently, as Canada's child population is again growing, access to child care is likely to get worse, not better, as 2011 census data show that the 0-4 year old cohort has been increasing at the highest rate in 50 years, up 11% between 2006 and 2011.

"Access" also means that parents have to be able to pay for child care. As public dollars for child care are limited in most of Canada, child care programs rely mostly on parent fees. Parent fees are often higher than university tuition, while fee subsidies (used in all jurisdictions except Quebec) fail to make child care financially accessible to eligible parents. A 2014 study of fees in the 22 largest cities showed that Toronto's parent fees were the highest at \$1,676/month for an infant while the lowest fees were in Quebec<sup>2</sup> cities—\$152/month for all age groups (Macdonald & Friendly, 2014).

Quebec research by economist Pierre Fortin supports the assertion that the absence of affordable child care keeps women out of the labour force (or, conversely, that its presence allows women to enter it). The employment rate for Quebec women went up substantially when the low-cost child care system was introduced; Fortin notes that 70,000 more women now hold jobs as a result of the funded Quebec child care system (Fortin, 2014).

### **Presence of children is linked to the still hefty wage gap between men and women**

Statistics Canada data from 2010-2011 show women earning only 75% of men's earnings. If all employed men and women (not just full-year, full-time workers are included), the gap is even bigger, with women earning only 69% of all men's wages; Women working full time and full year still earn 20 percent less than men working full time and full year.

While employment rates for women with young children are not significantly different from those of women without children, women with children earned even less—12%-20% less—than women without children (Turcotte, 2011). While there are undoubtedly multiple personal, family and economic dynamics that determine whether, and how much, women work, the absence of good, affordable child care options is identified over and over again in research as a key factor. Statistics Canada data report

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<sup>2</sup> In November 2014, the Quebec government announced that the \$7/day flat fee for all income and age groups would end and that a sliding scale geared to income would be introduced. It is reported that the lowest fee would rise to \$8/day and would slide up to \$15 to \$20 for those making more than \$150,000.

that while more than six out of 10 part time workers were women (2009), 35% said they were working part time because of child care responsibilities.

### **Single mothers are over-represented in poverty numbers**

A study from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives notes that, "women on their own are the poorest of the poor", especially lone-parent mothers—almost five times more likely to be poor than mothers in two parent families (Townson, 2009). The data show that not only are lone parent mothers more likely to be poor but if they're employed, they're more likely to be working at low-wage, insecure jobs with few benefits. Their child care predicament—how to access affordable, reliable, quality child care if you have limited personal and financial resources—creates a major barrier for low income single mothers trying to get the education or training they need to access good jobs or—if employed—pursue advancement.

### **Women are still over-represented in part time, precarious and low wage work**

Statistics Canada data show that part-time workers are predominantly women who hold more service, low wage and part-time jobs; almost 70% of part-timers are women (Turcotte, 2011). A key reason given for women's part time work status is "caring for children", accounting for 35% of part timers. Additionally, studies show that precarious (insecure, short-term, casual or seasonal) employment—a growing concern in Canada—is gendered, as unstable, unprotected jobs are increasingly held by women, especially racialized women, new immigrants and single parents (Vosko & Clark, 2009).

### **Canadian women are still under-represented in powerful positions**

Across sectors such as academia, corporate boards, senior management and government, Canadian women are under-represented, sometimes breathtakingly so. A study by the Council of Canadian Academies found that women are 1/3 of full-time university faculty but make up only 21.7% of full professors. The study identified child care as remaining "women's biggest challenge in academia" (Expert Panel on Women in University Research, 2012).

Women are scarce in corporate boardrooms too, with Canada's proportion of women on corporate boards one of the lowest in the OECD and among senior managers, only 32% were women in 2009 (TD Economics, 2013).

According to Equal Voice, women only make up about one quarter of Members of Parliament—and this is a historic high (Equal Voice, 2014). The issue of child care for Members of Parliament was identified as an issue earlier this year. Canada is now ranked 52nd among countries with regard to the number of women in elected office. The United Nations women's program recommends using quotas to boost the number of women legislators, to "ensure that women are in parliaments, on the front-line of justice, and represented in the judiciary and customary justice systems to help women access their rights".

### **Poor access to child care wastes woman-resources and public resources**

Access to child care—though often construed as a support to women's employment—is just as important for women who are students and trainees at all levels.

Today Canadian women are excelling in post-secondary education; in 2008 women made up 60% of university undergraduates, 54% of Masters graduates and 44% of PhD graduates (Turcotte, 2011). Yet inadequate funding for child care creates the kinds of child care "choices" that plague today's young women such as one announced several years ago by the City of Ottawa: graduate and professional student-mothers would be bumped from the lengthy child care fee subsidy wait list as "less deserving" than untrained applicants or undergraduates.

Inadequate funding for child care also means that women who are new immigrants in Canada are unable to participate in English or French language training, upgrade foreign credentials or learn new skills. Even the federal LINC child minding programs set up to care for children of new language learners on a short-term basis are reported to have long waiting lists.

Lack of child care is a barrier to participation in all kinds of education and training from high school to community college to undergraduate, PhD and law school programs, as well as apprenticeships and specific training—all essential for women's equality, economic prosperity and leadership.

### **Child care—the ramp that provides equal access to the workforce for mothers**

Many years ago (and 14 years after the Royal Commission on the Status of Women first proposed a national child care program), the 1984 Report of the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment, headed by now-Supreme Court Justice Rosalie Abella included the oft-quoted observation about child care as “the ramp”. Over the years, it has proven to be true for women from all sectors. It is stunning that so many years after the Abella Commission, poor access to quality child care is still one of the main challenges faced by so many women.

Today Canada's lack of action on universal child care continues to have a profound impact on women's equality of opportunity and leadership chances in all regions of Canada—across the life span, across diverse groups and across the economic spectrum. The lack of a national child care program presents a massive societal and systemic challenge that undermines equality of opportunity and limit women's opportunities to become leaders.

### **Realizing the vision: What should happen**

In mid November, child care advocates, policymakers, researchers, parents, and other supporters from across Canada met at ChildCare2020, Canada's fourth national child care policy conference, and the first national child care conference in ten years. The conference background paper outlined a “vision<sup>3</sup>” for cross-Canada child care in 2020 and proposed a way of moving forward to shape the long hoped-for national child care program. The following section is taken from the background paper, which was unanimously endorsed by the 600+ conference delegates and will soon be gathering endorsements across Canada.

Years of experience and the best evidence show that the surest way to ensure child care options (“choice”) for all Canadian women would be to use a multi-layered governance approach that includes: an overarching national policy framework and

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<sup>3</sup> The “vision” is captured in a three minute animated video developed for the conference, available online at <http://psacunion.ca/what-would-childcare-look-if-government-really-cared> and [http://syndicatafpc.ca/de-quoi-auraient-lair-les-garderies-si-le-gouvernement-sy-mettait?\\_ga=1.186020396.46709671.1416423455](http://syndicatafpc.ca/de-quoi-auraient-lair-les-garderies-si-le-gouvernement-sy-mettait?_ga=1.186020396.46709671.1416423455)

funding strategy; robust service systems designed and administered by each province/territory; and local management and planning, including a democratic voice for parents and early childhood educators.

The national policy framework should be based on a set of overarching principles and include a number of system components covering roles and responsibilities, targets and timetables, and accountability measures to assess progress towards goals (ChildCare2020 Steering Committee, 2014, available online (EN) [http://childcare2020.ca/sites/default/files/VisionChildCare2020Nov3ENG\\_.pdf](http://childcare2020.ca/sites/default/files/VisionChildCare2020Nov3ENG_.pdf) and (FR) <http://childcare2020.ca/sites/default/files/VisionChildCare2020Nov3FRE.pdf>).

The “vision” paper observed that Canada’s parents, researchers, activists and many policy makers have spent decades advocating for a universal, inclusive, high quality, public, comprehensive child care system but that despite these efforts, this goal has not yet been achieved, leaving Canada an international laggard whose women and children are poorly supported.

The paper has outlined a vision for such a system and—crucially—how it is possible to “get from here to there.” It concluded with a hope that this time we will achieve the national ECEC system that Canadians from coast-to-coast-to coast want, and that we, our children and our children’s children deserve and encouraged Canadians to get involved in this important debate.

The House of Commons’ Standing Committee on the Status of Women’s *Study on the economic leadership and prosperity of Canadian women* is, therefore, very timely. I urge you to consider that child care is a key “...societal and systemic challenge that undermine equality of opportunity and limit women’s ability to become leaders” and join me and my colleagues in the child care movement in proposing solutions.

The Childcare Resource and Research Unit is an early childhood education and child care (ECEC) policy research institute with a mandate to further ECEC policy and programs in Canada. It was established to:

- provide public education, resources and consultation on ECEC policy and research;
- foster and support research in various fields focusing on ECEC;
- carry out relevant research projects and publish the results;
- support, promote and provide communication on ECEC policy and research.

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