

Women, Citizenship and  
Canadian Child Care Policy in the 1990s

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## **About the author**

Vappu Tyyskä obtained her PhD in Sociology from the University of Toronto in 1993. Since then, she has taught in several southern Ontario Universities. She is currently Assistant Professor of Sociology at the Ryerson Polytechnic University where she teaches courses on diversity, gender, family, and youth. Dr. Tyyskä has been researching child care policy and child care advocacy since the late 1980s, and has published a book and numerous articles on the subject. She has a chapter forthcoming in 2002 in a book on Canadian Child Care Advocacy, edited by Susan Prentice (Fernwood Press). She continues to maintain an interest in this area, while engaging in new research in the areas of adolescence and youth, and adolescence-parent relations. Her latest book on young people in Canada is forthcoming in the summer of 2001 (Canadian Scholars' Press).

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## **Abstract**

Developments in Canadian child day care policy in the 1990s at the federal, provincial (Ontario) and municipal (Toronto and Peel) levels highlight the problems associated with the male model of citizenship. The political climate poses a particular threat to the social citizenship rights of women and members of lower socio-economic groups. Likewise, political citizenship is negatively affected, as most women's and advocacy organizations are dismissed by governments as "special interest groups". Based on their outsider status in official politics, and lacking stable alliances, these organizations are drawn toward political solutions that may prove palatable to governments in the short run but may undermine general claims for child care as a universal rather than a targeted service.

## Introduction

In the late 1990's, yet another set of reports by Canadian policy think-tanks and federal government bodies affirmed the need for "a new system of care for children". Nevertheless, "it seems unlikely that a universal day-care system [will] be part of the picture" (McIlroy 1999). For nearly three decades, beginning with the recommendations of the Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (1970), there have been aborted attempts to create a national child care system in Canada. Throughout the 1980s, there was a lot of attention to child care as both the Liberal and Conservative federal governments, through their extensive consultations and research, determined that a lack of appropriate child care has serious detrimental effects on women's chances for equitable participation in the economy and in society<sup>1</sup>.

The end result of three decades of advocacy for a publicly funded child care system has been an increase in public awareness but no real relief for the estimated 1.5 million Canadian children, representing approximately 90% of the total child population, in need of care while their parents engage in wage work or studies (Tyyskä 1995; Doherty, Friendly and Oloman 1998,1-2). In fact, in this and other matters that affect women's social citizenship rights, there has been a distinct turn for the worse in the 1990s, reflecting neo-conservative and neo-liberal shifts in political climate (O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver 1999, 43-65).

The deterioration of women's citizenship rights in this political climate has provided ample material for feminist scholars. Feminist analysis has expanded the terms "welfare state" and "social policy" in a way that overcomes the confines of the public/private and market/family distinctions embedded in liberalism (O'Connor et al. 1999; Evans and Wekerle 1997; Baines, Evans and Neysmith 1998). This project of gendering welfare has involved a documentation and deconstruction of the complexities of women's social citizenship rights, i.e. their access to the social goods available through the welfare state (O'Connor 1996, 49; Marshall 1983, 249; as in Gabriel 1996, 176; Bulmer and Rees 1996). At the same time, attention has been paid, in the feminist analysis, to women's political citizenship, i.e. the influence of women's movements and political activism on the kinds of rights and access to social goods that women receive (Gordon 1990, 18-23, in Brodie 1996, 11-12; O'Connor 1996; Hobson, Michel and Orloff, 1994, 2; Sarvasy and Siim 1994; O'Connor et al. 1999, 23-28). Further, analysis of social and political citizenship has revealed the intersection of gender inequality with other inequalities based on social class, race and ethnicity (O'Connor et al. 1999; Evans and Wekerle 1997; Baines et al. 1998).

It is in this scholarly context, and recognizing the importance of child care as an issue that has a special relevance to women that I will analyze developments in Canadian child care policy in the 1990s. Most importantly, I will discuss the child care policy process as one

in which state bodies are challenged by the diverse and largely woman-driven child care advocacy movement. Further, consonant with the structural complexities of government in Canada, I will discuss child care policies on three levels: federal, provincial (exemplified by the most populous province, Ontario) and municipal/regional. Recognizing the unique role of municipalities in the province of Ontario, I will also analyze the policy and advocacy related to child care in two of Ontario's largest municipalities, the City of Toronto and the Regional Municipality of Peel. The developments of the last decade will highlight not only the gendering of the welfare state but also its social class characteristics.

What is at issue here are two separate but connected strands of inquiry. First, I will outline some of the major developments of the 1990s that create increasing hardship for women. Foremost among these is the diminished accessibility to child care due to the stagnation of and/or cutbacks in the funding of child care services. Connected to this is the ongoing concern among advocates for not-for-profit child care, about a shift of services to the private and/or unregulated sector (which arguably lowers the quality of child care and thus results in increased stress on children and their primary caregivers, most of whom are women) (Doherty et al. 1998, 31-38). At issue are also the poor and deteriorating working conditions of different categories of (mostly female) child care providers. These considerations will highlight the importance of linking social class and gender inequality in an analysis of social policy.

Second, I will address the implications of the social policy process in the 1990s for women who have engaged in concerted and organized attempts to improve the child care system from the 1970s onward. In other words, I will discuss the effectiveness of different strategies related to child care advocacy. This links to some of the most persistent questions among feminists that are related to political citizenship, i.e. whether it is possible to obtain social rights for women through the state (e.g. Tyyskä 1998), and if so, what are the conditions that make it possible. Answers to these questions have important consequences for future strategies for the women's movement.

## Women's Social Rights

As a result of more than two decades of critical feminist analysis of the mainstream-malestream debates on citizenship, we are left with a clear understanding that citizenship status is based on a specific male standard (Marshall 1964, 84, in O'Connor 1996, 50), which emerged from liberal notions of a "public/private" or "market/family" split (Pateman 1988, in O'Connor 1996, 51-52; Pateman 1989, in Cass 1994, 112; O'Connor et al. 1999). This dichotomy is expressed in the contrast between the "rights" of "independent", presumably male, wage-earners who are "producers", and the "needs" of presumably female non-wage earners who are "consumers". The latter are variously "dependent" on male wage-earners or the state either as welfare recipients (O'Connor 1996, 50-51; Fraser and Gordon 1994, 10-11) or as workers in the public sector (Tyyskä 1995). This means that the social contract is restricted to the entitled members of society who are male and contribute to the economy, as opposed to "charity" and excluded cases who are non-contributory, female, and marginal to the social contract (O'Connor 1996, 54).

Feminists challenge the notion of "women's dependency" on various grounds (Gabriel 1996, 174-176; O'Connor 1996; Hollingsworth and Tyyskä 1988; Fraser and Gordon 1994, 11; Tyyskä 1995; Cass 1994, 111; Cohen 1993b, 270-273) which are rooted in the above dichotomies inherent in modern western welfare states (O'Connor et al. 1999, 61-65). Most importantly, it has been pointed out that men's freedom to participate in wage work actually depends on the domestic and care-giving work that is performed by women (e.g. Fraser and Gordon 1994; Pateman 1988, in O'Connor 1996, 51-52; Hobson et al. 1994, 2). In contrast, women are prevented from full participation in wage work because of their domestic work and care-giving (family reasons). They are thus excluded from the category of those deserving entitlements, and rendered into a stigmatized, undeserving category of welfare and social policy beneficiaries, as providers of informal social welfare. In the end, men's independence and citizenship entitlement is premised on their freedom from care-giving work while women's dependence gives them secondary citizenship (Pateman 1989, as in Cass 1994, 112-115; Fraser 1994).

The discussion of citizenship entitlements is by no means a straightforward one for the women's movement. Based on the prevailing and persistent gender dichotomy, there are two possible avenues toward citizenship for women. One is to demand the same rights as men enjoy. The other is to claim an acknowledgment of women's role as caregivers (Pateman 1989, 197, in Cass 1994, 113-114). This distinction is rooted in the classic debates between "equality" and "difference" feminists<sup>2</sup>. The former refers to treating women like men and the latter means treating women differently in areas where they differ from men (Fraser 1994).

Increasingly, feminist scholars have consciously moved away from a tendency, embedded in the general feminist critique of liberalism, to treat women as a unitary category. In the 1990s, feminist theory and analysis became oriented toward a detailed analysis of the intersection of social class, gender, race and ethnicity and nationality (O'Connor et al. 1999; Sarvasy and Siim 1994, 251; Evans and Wekerle 1997; Baines et al. 1998). My concern in this paper with the intersection of gender and social class both complicates and enriches the equality/difference debate and leads toward new avenues for researching the serious impact on women of the social policy changes that have taken place in the 1990s.

## **Women, Federalism and the Dependency Discourse**

The theme of reducing welfare dependency figures prominently in Canadian public policy debates of the 1980s and the 1990s. The federal Conservative government adopted this rhetoric in the mid-1980s, when there was a slow and almost secretive erosion of social programs, called "social policy by stealth" (Gratton Gray 1990, in Cohen 1993b, 267). First, there was a watering down or removal of programs that served specific minority groups, i.e. those on social assistance, recipients of low-income housing, and those on unemployment insurance. These were followed by fundamental changes to the major social programs, i.e. pensions, health care and education (Cohen 1993b).

The above changes to social programs reflect an assumption of universal citizenship, in line with the previously outlined male model of citizenship. In essence, this model is premised on the notion that the social conditions of all citizens are equal, based on a male model of citizens who are all fully and beneficially linked to the labour market. There is no attention to the differential impact of social policy cuts on lower socio-economic groups and lower status groups such as women, whose position in the labour market is likely to be more tenuous and/or lower paid. As Brodie (1996:19) argues, social citizenship has shifted away from the 1960s and 1970s ideal of universal, publicly provided services toward "market-oriented values such as self-reliance, efficiency, and competition".

It has been noted that as welfare states are being dismantled, specific gendered features of citizenship become starkly visible. Liberals and conservatives alike evoke negative imagery, stigmatizing women who engage in caring work as dependents of the state (Fraser and Gordon 1994, 19-21). There is a renewed emphasis on distinguishing between deserving and undeserving recipients of social goods<sup>3</sup>. This targeting of recipients, which is particularly prevalent in Canada in the 1990s, is a practice that pathologizes or problematizes the recipients. This is problematic in that there is, on the one hand, a downplaying of general social needs, while, on the other hand, the structural causes of the problems of the targeted groups are ignored (Brodie 1996, 20-21; Fraser and Gordon 1994, 19-21). Thus, targeting is

also indicative of an increase in the social class divide, or the gap between “haves” and “have-nots” which works in conjunction with the gender hierarchy (O’Connor et al. 1999).

## **Federalism and Child Care Policy**

The history of Canadian child care policy illustrates the general link between social class and gender hierarchies, compounded by the division of powers among the federal, provincial and municipal governments.

Under the *British North America (BNA) Act* of 1867, which laid the foundations of Canadian government, social services like child care are provincial and territorial responsibilities, leading to a wide variety in availability, arrangements, costs and standards across the 10 provinces and three territories<sup>4</sup> in the nation (Tyyskä 1995).

From 1966 to 1996, the Canada Assistance Plan provided 50/50 cost-sharing between the federal and provincial/territorial governments, for subsidized child care spaces in non-profit and/or government operated child care facilities. Because eligibility for the subsidy was ultimately determined by provincial/territorial governments, there was great variation across the country. It has been calculated that as few as 7% (Oloman 1992) to 15% (Lero and Johnson 1994, Cleveland 1999) of the 72% of children potentially eligible for subsidy actually received one because none of the provinces used the most flexible interpretation of federal government’s definition of “likelihood of need”.

There are several child care related federal tax measures that operated separately from the CAP. Under the Income Tax Act, the Child Care Expense Deduction is granted to families who can produce receipts for child care expenses<sup>5</sup>. A more recent (1988) tax measure is a Child Tax Credit for families who did not have child care receipts. Both tax systems as well as the CAP have been criticized for reflecting a two-tier system; the former for those families that could afford the better quality and more expensive child care facilities, and the latter for those whose child care arrangements depended on the informal and poorly paid child care sector (Bach and Phillips 1998, 235). Further, the CAP was generally criticized by women’s organizations as inadequate because it was a welfare program, and had no direct impact on the overall supply of services. It was only applied to people in poverty, an increasing number of whom are in households headed by single mothers. Because of the negative imagery of welfare dependency associated with the program, these families and children were often stigmatized for their reliance on the child care subsidy<sup>6</sup>.

Although there had been extensive federal child care policy reviews in the 1980s<sup>7</sup>, the child care system faced a serious threat in the 1990s as the federal government reduced its

sharing of costs with the provinces and territories. In 1990, the federal Conservative government moved unilaterally to put a 5% limit on the increase of spending under the CAP in the three wealthiest provinces, Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia (Oloman 1992). In early 1992, the federal Conservative government formally abandoned its promised national child care plan (Lero and Johnson 1994; Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) 1995; Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC) 1995c). A new child care promise was first taken up by the Liberal government elected in 1993 (CUPE 1995; OCBCC 1995c) but later abandoned in 1996 (Canadian Child Care Federation(CCCF) 1995; Liberal Party of Canada 1993; Bach and Phillips 1998, 235).

*The Canada Health and Social Transfer, 1996*

In October 1994, the federal Liberal government took first measures toward what was later identified as one of the earliest moves toward a new agenda of “neo-liberalism” through its Social Security Review aimed at restructuring government programs and priorities. It announced in the Budget of February 1995 that the CAP, as well as health and post-secondary education expenditures under the Established Programs Financing (EPF) would be rolled into a block fund in the fiscal year 1996/97, under the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST).

The CHST is associated with a decline counted in billions of dollars in cash transfers from the federal government to the provinces, through both a withdrawal of funds and partial de-indexation of the cost-sharing formula (Doherty et al. 1995; Battle 1995). Under CAP, the cost sharing arrangement had carried several important conditions including a mandatory appeal process combined with the stipulation that no one could be refused (means-tested) assistance which had eliminated the possibility of workfare (Ross 1996). Under the CHST, these conditions have been abandoned and the allocation of funds has been left up to the provinces and territories according to their own priorities<sup>8</sup>, much to the consternation of social reformers (Dyck 1996, 80; Canadian Council on Social Development 1996, 2).

Importantly, in the CHST, there is no mechanism to ensure that any funds will be spent on child care, and there is no guarantee of provincial contributions to match the federal money. In fact, child care has to compete with more significant social transfer areas, such post-secondary education, and health care (CCCF 1995; Doherty et al. 1995; Torjman and Battle 1995). This reduced federal commitment to child care was followed by an attempt, in the fall of 1995, to consult with the provinces and territories but these consultations failed to result in a national child care program (Friendly, 2001).

It should be noted that recent examinations of annual provincial allocations for regulated child care show that funding levels were either maintained or increased slightly

between 1996 and 1998 in seven of the ten provinces. Manitoba, Alberta and Ontario were the only provinces where funding was cut back; in Ontario funding decreased from close to \$520 million in 1996 to approximately \$432 million in 1998 (Childcare Resource and Research Unit 2000). Although most of the provinces have at least maintained the status quo in child care, introduction of the CHST opened a new door to a reduction in spending in an area particularly vulnerable to changes in economic or political climate.

This diminished federal commitment to child care spells serious consequences for Canadian families and an uphill battle for the child care advocacy movement (Bach and Phillips 1998, 235-246). In this setting, child care advocates and the members of the feminist movement are in the unpleasant position of having to compete with one another over dwindling amounts of funds, which may cause further problems within the feminist movement itself.

## **Women, Federalism and Political Citizenship**

In the 1970s, there was definite optimism in the Canadian women's movement, including the umbrella organization, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), about enlisting the help of the state to eradicate discrimination against women (Cohen 1993a, 19-20). Indeed, the achievements of the women's movement are many, and public policy initiatives, including employment and pay equity and child care, are rooted in the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, initiated by a group of women who concurrently with the Royal Commission, launched NAC (1967, Report in 1970) (Tyyskä 1995; Bashevkin 1998).

However, after nearly three decades of second wave feminist activism, a deep-seated pessimism took hold in the 1990s regarding limitations to the benefits that can be gained for women within the parameters of western welfare states (e.g. Brodie 1996, 10; Bashevkin 1998). Through this era of backlash (Faludi 1991), women's organizations are more than ever singled out for blame (McDaniel 1988: 7) and labeled "special interest groups" whose interests are pitted against the general interests of those who don't require state assistance and protection (Brodie 1996, 20-21). Since the neo-conservative shift in Canada, the women's movement has been on the defensive (Cohen 1993a; Cohen 1993b, 268; Bashevkin 1998)<sup>9</sup>. Thus, attempts on the federal level to pressure the government toward a universal child care program have not been successful.

In Canada, the effectiveness of the women's movement is limited by its low level of institutionalization. Women are poorly represented in political parties, electoral politics<sup>10</sup> and in the bureaucratic machinery<sup>11</sup>. Through the 1980s and the 1990s different government bodies dealing with women's issues have been cut, and funding to women's organizations

radically reduced and then eliminated<sup>12</sup>. This suggests that it is because of their position as outsiders that “women’s policies” like child care have not done well in Canada compared to other countries (e.g. Tyyskä, 1998).

Research (e.g. O’Connor et al., 1999; White, 1997) suggests that the presence of left-leaning third parties in power can temper the most severe tendencies toward downsizing of social programs. Since Canada’s only social democratic party alternative, the New Democratic Party (NDP), has generally fared poorly in both federal and provincial elections, it is not surprising that the downward spiral of cuts continues. It has also been shown that, where women’s issues are concerned, it is necessary to have two pre-conditions for success. The first one is that sufficient numbers of women need to be present in all political parties in order to achieve change that is beneficial to women. Thus, Canadian women’s general position as “outsiders” in relation to the political parties and the state, outlined above, has not served them well. Second, stable alliances are required among like-minded political groups in order to sustain efforts. In order to be successful, women’s organizations need alliances amongst themselves as well as with political parties and labour unions (Tyyskä, 1995, 1998). If these two factors are missing, the consequences can be negative, as is illustrated with child care policy directions in Ontario. In this province, the presence of an NDP government did not, in the end, amount to radical changes in the public child care scene. The NDP destroyed its alliances and its chances for re-election with unpopular moves, thus ushering in a neo-conservative government.

## **Child Care in the Province of Ontario**

In line with the national average, most Ontario children in need of care are in unlicensed, informal facilities where the quality of care is unpredictable at best. Only approximately 10% are in licensed child care facilities (CRRU, 1995; CRRU, 2000). Subsidies are given to some children of needy families in both non-profit and for-profit licensed child care facilities. Some funding to the unlicensed sector occurs through work training and welfare recipient training programs (City of Toronto, Planning and Development Department, 1991: 30-31)<sup>13</sup> which is now, contrary to previous provincial budgetary practice, counted as expenditure on child care.

### *The ONDP Era: Where Are the Spaces?*

In the early 1990s, actions of the Ontario New Democratic Party (ONDP) government gave some hope to advocates that the child care crisis would be solved in the province. The government moved to add subsidized child care spaces, to convert private-sector child care spaces into non-profit spaces, to bring child care workers into the Pay Equity Act, and to

include the pay equity increase in the wage enhancement grant for staff in non-profit centres (Boyd 1991; Ministry of Community and Social Services 1992; Metro Toronto Coalition 1992). The government also expanded the fully funded child care for work training participants primarily in regulated child care facilities (Metro Toronto Coalition, 1992: 27; OCBC 1995a: 2 OCBC 1997a. Part of the comprehensive plan was to provide care and early childhood education to pre-school children through “seamless day” kindergarten programs (OCBC 1997a). There was an 80% increase in child care expenditures between 1989 and 1995 (Office of the Provincial Auditor, 1995: 39), bringing the per capital expenditure on child care to the third highest among the provinces and territories, and staff salaries to the second highest (CRRU 1995).

All of these initiatives reflect a concern with a more inclusive notion of citizenship. These are just some of the measures that were made possible because there were some women in the Ontario NDP government who had participated in child care advocacy and had built links between women’s groups, advocates and the labour movement throughout the 1970s and 1980s. They carried their concerns into the government, bolstered by the buoyantly optimistic child care advocacy movement (Tyyskä, 1995; 1998). In the end, however, the measures did not add substantially to actual child care spaces. There was a gradual but minimal reduction in the number of commercial child care centres and agencies from 1993 to 1994 while there was only minimal growth in the non-profit sector (MCSS 1993a, 1993b, 1994a, 1994b).

This piece-meal and lacklustre progress can be explained through the model presented above. First, the effectiveness of social democratic third parties may not reach to the area of women’s social rights unless women themselves form a significant proportion of the government. Second, there need to be relatively permanent alliances and coalitions related to a range of issues (Tyyskä, 1998). Neither of these conditions was met by the NDP government. Women’s representation in government did not increase significantly, and the ONDP alienated its labour union allies through some unpopular political moves, including the Social Contract which imposed wage cuts on public sector workers in an atmosphere of fiscal restraint more in line with neo-conservatism than traditional socialism (Walkom, 1994, 121-146). The general disillusionment and the withdrawal of NDP’s traditional allies contributed to the defeat of the NDP government in the 1995 provincial elections.

### *The Conservative Era: Cut Everything!*

On June 8th, 1995, the New Democratic government of Ontario was replaced in a landslide victory by the Conservative Party which made an immediate and severe reduction in funding to different social service sectors, beginning with a 47% cut in municipal transfer payments over 1995-1997 (Eves 1995b; OCBC, 1996a, 1996b).

In the child care sector, the Conservatives reversed NDP child care initiatives, canceling the conversion of private-sector child care spaces into non-profit spaces, and trying to remove child care workers from inclusion in the Pay Equity Act. Because of the general downloading of services to the municipalities, child care spaces available under provincial work training programs were changed from a 100% provincial funding to an 80/20 provincial/municipal funding formula (Eves 1995b). This included child care provided under workfare (Bill 142) introduced in 1998 (OCBCC 1998). Child care bursaries to sole-support parents in post secondary institutions were cut completely (Ontario Students Advocacy Group for Sole Support Parents 1997). These measures had particularly ill effects on the most vulnerable and poor segments of the population (OCBCC 1995a), and generally jeopardized the well-being of women with children.

The Ontario government's general cuts applied to social service agencies, school boards and post-secondary institutions had a further impact on child care services because 40% of child care is provided in schools, often with low or no rent and with significant support (OCBCC 1997b). Capital funds for child care centres in schools were cancelled (Eves 1995a; The Globe and Mail 1996). Through two separate Bills (Bill 26 and Bill 104), the Conservatives moved to cut funding to junior kindergarten programs, and made their delivery voluntary rather than mandatory (OCBCC 1995a, 1997a). This resulted in the cancellation of junior kindergarten programs by 22 Ontario school boards, covering approximately 60,000 children, by early 1998 (McGuinty, 1998: 15). The end result is that more young children previously covered by the early childhood education programs in schools are competing for spaces in the child care sector.

The total cuts in the 1995-1997 period amounted to a \$60 million reduction in the child care budget (OCBCC 1995b). At the same time, a federal government plan for new cost sharing failed to materialize (OCBCC 1995a, 1996a, 1996b). A conservative estimate is that since taking office in 1995, the provincial government has cut regulated child care expenditures by approximately 40% (OCBCC 1999).

*Who is a "Special Interest Group"?*

While their advocacy for publicly funded child care facilities fell on deaf ears, the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC) and the ONDP held their own public hearings on child care in Ontario (ONDP 1996; OCBCC 1995 a, 1995b; Churley 1996). In dismissing the OCBCC as "one of the groups" concerned with child care (Hansard 1996), the Conservative government followed the general top-down political approaches of the 1990s where those unpalatable to the ruling party are dubbed "special interest groups", regardless of their size and public influence.

Meanwhile, the government has shown a partiality for the Association of Day Care Operators of Ontario (ADCO), an agency of private day care operators. ADCO supported the Conservative Party's child care platform, which goes counter to the interests of women and children in that it promotes "parental choice" through reducing access to government regulated child care, lower child care subsidies, the elimination of child care wage subsidies and reducing standards of care (ADCO 1995a, 1995b: 3; Legislative Assembly of Ontario, Standing Committee on Social Development 1997:16; OCBCC 1995a: 4).

With the support of the private sector child care lobby, the Conservative government moved to implement this platform in its Child Care Review, unveiled in the fall of 1996 (OCBCC 1996b; MCSS 1996b). Among the recommendations was a serious reduction in the criteria commonly used to establish the quality of child care (e.g. Doherty et al. 1998: 54-55) the use of untrained volunteers, and a downward adjustment of staff-child ratios.

The pay equity monies were to be redirected to promised new fee subsidies for close to 13,000 children in low-income families (MCSS 1996a, Rusk 1996; Toronto Star 1996a), with proposed wage reductions of up to 25% (on average \$4,000) for Ontario child care workers many of whose salaries approach the poverty line even with the previous wage grants (Ottawa Citizen 1996). The promise of additional subsidized spaces by the Conservative government was described as a "cruel hoax" by the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care. By the beginning of 1996, approximately 2,800 Ontarians had lost their child care subsidies as a result of funding cuts (Toronto Star 1996b). In other words, the cost of child care was transferred onto child care providers and parents, a move that is particularly taxing for low-income families, who make up the waiting lists for subsidized child care spaces. Furthermore, since workfare had become mandatory for women with school-age children, the burden on families has increased for women in the lowest income groups, as well as increasing the general stress on the child care system

In summary, the Conservative government is reinforcing class divisions by restricting the availability of subsidies for the lowest-income families and by continuing to treat child care workers as a poorly paid underclass. At the same time, additional pressure is put on women who carry the burden for either providing child care as poorly paid workers in the child care sector, or have to make arrangements for child care for their children so they can participate in the economy as poorly paid workers.

### *Municipalities Under Fire*

By the end of 1996, about 9,000 subsidies had been cut by municipalities due to reduced provincial funding. Municipalities were simply unable to share their portion of the costs of new subsidized spaces (OCBCC 1996b). Municipal finances were stretched beyond the limit with the downloading of social services, including child care, from the province to the

municipalities beginning January 1, 1998. This resulted in an estimated 400% increase in municipal funding pressure (Toronto Star 1997; OCBCC 1997b; Ecker 1997), due to the multiple elements associated with the funding formula.

Municipalities also faced a “double whammy” where child care services are concerned. As social services were downloaded to the municipalities, they were also, for the first time in history, made legally obligated to provide child care within their boundaries. At the same time, the province downloaded half of its previous 100% financial commitment in the areas of wage grants, resource centres, special needs, and minor capital (program) commitments. Major capital expenditures were eliminated, and the previously provincial responsibility for licensing under the Day Nurseries Act was slated to be completely transferred onto municipalities (OCBCC 1997b; Ecker 1997; Urquhart 1997: B1, B5; Toronto Star 1997). Totally unheard were the vocal objections of child care advocates concerned with the limited fiscal capacities of municipalities (OCBCC 1997c; Toronto Star 1997) and the inevitable deterioration in child care that could be anticipated.

In January 1997, a new door was opened to the privatization of existing child care services. Cash strapped municipalities were encouraged to save on the costs of wage grants and other related costs by opting to direct parents to unlicensed care. The Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (1997c) described this as a major move toward “the collapse of regulated child care”. In the late 1990s, the Ontario government moved to consolidate this market model of child care through a tax credit toward child care expenses of the working poor and full-time adult students, a measure which in no way helps children who are on long waiting lists for a child care space (Mallan 1997). Child care advocates are especially critical of the Child Care Supplement, initiated in 1998, because it relies on “money taken from the poorest children — children on welfare” (Ontario Campaign 2000, 1999: 3). This program makes children dependent on their parents’ employment status for receipt of money (OCBCC 1999). The Child Care Supplement is, in fact, a working income supplement for families where at least one parent is employed. It is paid for through the National Child Benefit agreement between the federal and provincial governments that allow provinces to claw back an equivalent amount of money from people on social assistance, and presumably use it on children’s programs. In Ontario, as well as most other provinces, the clawback money is re-directed to the working poor.

Another Ontario government initiative in 1999, in line with the attention to “families in need”, is the requirement that young “teen” parents enroll in school as a condition for the receipt of social assistance. Although in principle this measure is aimed at enhancing the employability of young parents, it makes poor sense in the light of a general lack of child care spaces, providing additional stress to young mothers (OCBCC 1999: 3).

In sum, these measures reflect on the one hand a trend toward targeting poor families and children, and on the other hand a general insensitivity to their needs. The model puts pressure on families to rely on a male breadwinner model of citizenship, undermining women's right to employment and suppresses their citizenship rights.

## **Municipal Problems: City of Toronto and Region of Peel**

Toronto, consisting of what were previously six municipalities (amalgamated into the City of Toronto in 1997) has a population of 2.39 million (Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto 1997). The Region of Peel is composed of three municipalities: City of Brampton, Town of Caledon and City of Mississauga. Presently, Peel population is approximately 850,000, most of whom live in Mississauga (Social Planning Council of Peel, 1997b). In both Toronto and Peel, the proportion of children and youth is high (Child and Youth Action Committee (CYAC) 1999a) and has produced significant pressure on the child care system. There have been long-standing provincial child care funding shortfalls in both Toronto and Peel, resulting in increasingly long waiting lists for subsidized child care (Peel Children's Centre 1999; MCS, 1990: 1-5; CYAC 1999b).

Reflecting these major problems, a Task Force was established in Peel in the mid-1990s to work with the provincial government to redress the inequities (Peel Children's Centre, 1996). Toronto, likewise, had a history of several child care task forces. The City had been exceeding its 20% share in times of provincial funding shortfalls (MCS: 1990:9)<sup>14</sup>. Attempts to return to the original cost sharing formula by 1993 were supported by child care advocates who wanted to pressure for more funding from provincial and federal governments instead of relying on municipal property tax money (Metro Toronto Coalition, 1992: 34, 50).

In both municipalities, pleas to federal and provincial governments proved to be unsuccessful, with the end result that subsidy waiting lists skyrocketed while the number of licensed vacancies dropped significantly from 1992 to 1995 (MCS, Children's Services 1993; MCS 1995). There were concerns that the decreased money to child care would result in lowering of standards of child care (OCBCC 1993: 2) and increases in the cost of child care to parents. This means that the benefits of a second wage earner's pay cheque are diminished, and that single parents, most of whom are women, are in especially dire circumstances.

It was estimated that in order to meet the needs of families defined as eligible for subsidy in Metro, an additional 25,000 subsidies would be needed (MCS, Children's Services 1995: 4).

## *Reactions to the Ontario Conservative Government Measures*

The City of Toronto launched an unsuccessful attempt to thwart the provincial Conservative government's downloading of services and the attempt to do away with school-based child care from 1995 onward (Metro Task Force 1996). The provincial workfare program put fiscal pressure on municipalities to pay the cost of child care for the 98% of recipients who chose licensed child care facilities over informal care (Social Planning Council of Peel 1997a; Ontario Campaign 2000, 1999). Toronto's offer to cost-share any additional child care spaces was turned down by the province (Ontario Campaign 2000, 1999). The real cost of providing subsidies for Ontario Works participants in Toronto would be many times higher than the province was willing to offer (OCBCC 1999).

In both municipalities, this created more pressure on subsidy waiting lists. Additionally, a significant increase in "purchase of service" child care contracts with private operators has been observed in Peel, due to changes introduced by the Provincial Conservative government which encourages for-profit sector child care (Region of Peel Children's Services 1998: 4-6).

As a result of the general downloading of child care and other services to the municipalities, municipalities have had serious problems with covering the increased costs, and there may be loss of child care spaces (Toronto Star 1997). The additional costs in Toronto alone were estimated to be in the neighbourhood of \$8.9 million (Kipfer 1999). Although the provinces move to mandate child care was welcomed by child care advocates they pointed out that the municipalities are in no way financially equipped to deal with cost increases of this magnitude (OCBCC 1999). There is increasing concern by social reform advocates that a two-tier system of child care will be strengthened. As the public system loses funding and minimum standards are reduced, middle-income parents are likely to leave and pay privately for high quality care. This will result in further erosion of the public system, leaving lower-income working families with substandard or unaffordable child care and creating a downward cycle of erosion (United Way of Greater Toronto 1997: 52).

Thus the provincial cuts and downloading of services are proving to be detrimental to child care services, as well as creating further difficulties for local child care organizations.

## *Advocacy Chained*

In Toronto, the long-standing child care delivery system was a reflection of an ongoing and strong advocacy movement after World War II (Findlay 1988) which continued to expand until the 1990s. Coming to the 1990s, into an era of neo-liberalism with its retrenchment, cutbacks and deregulation, these advocates, led by the Metro Toronto Coalition for Better Child Care and the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, have fought losing battles against the general downloading of services, against cuts, and for increased

funding. While on the provincial level, advocates have been ineffective against a hostile Conservative government that refuses to deal with “special interest groups”, Toronto advocates have found themselves faced with municipal politicians whose hands are tied because of the unprecedented funding cuts and the politics of balancing the need for child care against welfare and other social services. Accustomed to a political approach relying on lobbying of municipal politicians and confrontational tactics, advocates are finding that these efforts are not gaining them new ground in the new atmosphere of austerity. At the same time, it is remarkable that there has not been a large-scale deterioration in funding.

In comparison with the long-standing advocacy movement in Toronto, the Peel Region child care organizations work on a consensus model. In 1993, the Peel Child Care Committee (PCCC) was established at the request of the Ministry of Community and Social Services, Mississauga Area Office to provide advice and consultation to the Office on child care issues (PCCC 1995: 1). By 1995, the original 40 members had shrunk to 22 (PCCC 1995: 21) the committee presently has 17 members (VanBerkel 1999). In the first instance, this depletion in community organization members reflects an atmosphere of hostility toward community consultation in Ontario under the Conservative government. Further, the PCCC is not an advocacy association. It is most accurately characterized as a non-partisan, consumer-service committee, based on a loose coalition of differently oriented community groups. Based on interviews conducted with representatives of nine member organizations of the PCCC<sup>15</sup>, the main role of the PCCC is service provision, including child care staff training and consumer education through a child care information hotline and child care fairs. The success of this consumer approach seems questionable when one considers the decreasing number and range of services available to those in need of child care.

These experiences demonstrate is that in the atmosphere of neo-conservatism and neo-liberalism, more radical advocates for publicly funded child care services (e.g. OCBCC) are unlikely to make gains, regardless of their tactics. Meanwhile, even organizations with a consumer orientation (e.g. PCCC) are likely to be left out in the cold, with less to offer the expanding clientele. Both cases are reflective of a generally negative approach to consultation with “special interest groups”, particularly those having to do with improving the lives of women and children.

## Conclusions

Child care is a crucial element in the debates of social citizenship rights of women who continue to carry the main responsibility for care work. The current situation in Canada is a significant reversal of the strides made in women's social citizenship rights in previous decades. This is all the more alarming when it is associated with the ongoing erosion of the capability of women's organizations and woman-based advocacy organizations to influence policy making. The inroads made previously have met with a wall of neo-conservatism and neo-liberalism and a new top-down management approach by federal and provincial governments. The notion of "backlash" has been confirmed in a very real fashion with significant negative impacts on women and children. Women's social rights as citizens are being violated by several levels of governments that refuse to hear their pleas for child care and continue to condemn them to dependency. Whereas the dependency discourse in the previous decades was a covert subtext requiring feminist analysis to uncover its gender-based roots and manifestations, in the 1990s there is a blatantly overt theme of dependency that is carried out by the different levels of Canadian government that have undermined the child care system (which is a fragile one) through cutbacks and reorientation of social services.

Canadian child care has been once again defined as an issue that is related to battling child poverty, or assisting needy families. Although advocates have attempted to pressure politicians to acknowledge that child care services are desirable from the perspective of child development, most governments have only picked up this theme on the level of rhetoric, while real policy initiatives are missing. This approach characterizes both the federal government and its Understanding the Early Years projects, and the Ontario government with its Early Years project. With few exceptions, government measures continue to conceptualize child care "not as early childhood education or child development, but solely as an employment support for low income families". This undermines the theme of child development (Ontario Campaign 2000, 1999: 2-3; see also Doherty et al. 1998), and completely steers away from the strong attempts in the 1970s to link the issue with women's rights.

The most recent developments are in line with the observed tendency toward a "return to classical liberalism" with its themes of "freedom, market individualism and small government" (O'Connor et al. 1999: 52). This approach deepens social divisions, and further suppresses the social rights of women and people on low income. As seen in the above developments, these are starkly visible in the child care policy process which pits the needy against the middle-classes, low-income care providers against middle-class families, and women against one another as mothers and as underpaid child care providers. Significantly, women's employment "rights" and care giving "responsibilities" are becoming indistinguishable from one another. On the one hand, women's position as mothers/primary

caregivers makes it difficult for them to engage in wage work. On the other hand, those engaged in paid caring work are targeted for lower wages through a variety of cutbacks.

In the end, the policies may also serve to deepen the divisions in the comparatively weakened women's movement, with the end result that creating and sustaining policy platforms based on universalism is increasingly difficult. As discussed, there has been a significant shift in the relationship of advocates to the state in the 1990s. The policy platforms attractive to neo-liberal and neo-conservative governments today are quite different from those that were tolerated in the 1970s and the 1980s. Even today's NDP governments are quite different than they were a decade ago. The advocates for publicly funded and regulated child care are not being heard, primarily due to a lack of political will, whether because the advocates are unpalatable to the federal and provincial neo-liberal and neo-conservative regimes that reduce them into "special interest groups", or because they are (in Ontario) faced with cash-poor municipalities. Instead, governments are increasingly turning toward groups that favour private-sector or voluntary solutions, sometimes disguised as 'community solutions'. In this climate, it is an achievement that advocates in some municipalities, e.g. Toronto, have been consistently able to maintain child care service levels.

Some new ideological divisions in the women's movement may also emerge. It is quite significant that the voices of anti-poverty groups are being increasingly heard in the area of child care. Poverty, and particularly the high incidence of child poverty (at 24% as of 1999), is an issue in need of urgent solutions. However, reflective of the changing directions of grassroots activism in Canada, anti-poverty advocacy also unwittingly feeds directly into the mentality of service provision for the lowest socio-economic groups while suppressing voices that call for universal child care programs — a cause which, ironically, is generally supported by the anti-poverty advocates (Campaign 2000, Report Card 2000). The adoption of the anti-poverty platform by child care advocates (see e.g. Doherty et al. 1999: 47) serves to diffuse their main message, and may in the end prove not to be the wisest move if a platform of universalism is to be sustained. However, it illustrates in a very poignant way that there is a search for new directions in the Canadian women's movement in the face of the changing political landscape. Traditionally based on pragmatic/opportunistic and fleeting alliances (e.g. Tyyskä 1998), and lacking direct access to political power, Canadian feminist child care advocates, and the whole feminist movement, are struggling to renew themselves and seek for new strategies that will hopefully prove more successful at least in the short term. As political outsiders, the advocacy organizations are using any available opening to make a pitch for child care, including the anti-poverty strategy, which buys into the neo-conservative and neo-liberal ideology. In the long run, however, this strategy of political opportunism may prove detrimental.

## End Notes

1. For example, a study done for Labour Canada concluded that “child care demands and the lack or cost of child care facilities continue to prevent thousands [of women] from participating more fully in the labour force” (Akyeampong, 1988: 123).

2. Also called “civic” and “maternal” feminists, respectively, by Boling (1991).

3. In the words of Cohen (1993b: 272), the welfare state is “an idea that has degenerated from a belief that the state should be responsible for how well its citizens fare, to one that now sees welfare as state hand-outs to the unfortunate or the lazy”.

4. A third territory was added on April 1, 1999, with the splintering of a large part of the Northeast Territories into Nunavut, as an Inuit homeland.

5. In other words, parents can claim an income tax deduction for children in outside-home-care. During the 1980s, the maximum allowable deductions were raised to \$4,000 for children under seven, and to \$2,000 for children 7-14. In 1993, these were raised to \$5,000 and \$3,000 respectively (Oloman 1992). These were raised several more times in the 1990s.

6. Other piece-meal policies of the federal government included dependent care allowances offered for trainees in programs sponsored by Employment and Immigration Canada (devolved to the provinces in the 1990s) contributions to child care on Indian reserves through a special arrangement with the provinces and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada; and the Child Care Initiatives Fund (CCIF) which was put in place in the late 1980s by the federal Conservative government (Oloman 1992). The CCIF encouraged research of alternative child care models, and was replaced by a similar but smaller fund, called Child Care Visions, when the Liberals took power in 1993.

7. In response to pressure from child care advocates and the women’s movement, federal child care policy reviews were initiated by both the Liberal and Conservative governments in the 1980s. The Conservative government attempted to put in place a Child Care Act in 1987 (which was not supported by the child care involvement) through the combined efforts of women’s and child care advocacy organizations and their allies in the Senate. It died on the order paper. (Tyyskä 1995).

8. The only condition that remains is a non-minimum residency requirement on welfare transfers.

9. Funding to women’s organizations and grass roots self-help organizations and community groups was severely cut by the federal Conservatives (Rebick 1992, Bashevkin 1998), and

their issues and concerns were ignored. The Canadian women's umbrella organization, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) was nearly destroyed in this process (Rebick 1992). In 1998, NAC refused federal government funding on the grounds that it was project funding, not core funding (Globe and Mail 1998). Later on, NAC did receive a project grant.

10. In the 1993 federal elections, only 18% of the Members of Parliament were women. This was a record high and compares favourably with elections until 1984 when fewer than 10% of the elected members were women (Erickson 1998: 220-222). This has diminished since 1993.

11. Only 12% of all managers on the federal government level are women (MacIvor 1996: 285).

12. One of the main governmental bodies was the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (CASCW), put in place by the federal Liberal government in 1973. Its mandate was to commission research and organize conferences on matters of importance to women. The CASCW was terminated in 1995 by the Chretien government. Another important body is the Women's Program, which was established as a separate section of the Department of the Secretary of State. This body funded the major women's groups in Canada, and now grants money for special projects. The funding of the Women's Program increased annually until 1985-86, and from then on it was gradually diminished, until it stopped totally in 1995 (MacIvor 1996: 330-354). The major recipients of the Women's Program support in Canada have been the so-called "institutionalized" women's organizations, including Women's Legal Education Action Fund (LEAF), the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAOW), and the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) (MacIvor 1996: 334-335). Of these, NAC is the umbrella organization, including about 600 member organizations. A number of child care groups receive funds from the Women's Programme.

13. The Support to Employment Program (STEP) assists welfare recipients and the working poor to enter the work force by providing 50/50 federal/provincial funding toward child care.

14. The cost sharing proportions for subsidies in 1989 were (theoretically though not in reality) 30% municipal, 27% provincial and 43% federal, instead of the 20:30:50 split that was traditional in Ontario (MCS 1990: 1-5).

15. Conducted in the winter of 1998/99.

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## **ABOUT THE CHILDCARE RESOURCE AND RESEARCH UNIT**

The Childcare Resource and Research Unit at the Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto, is a policy and research oriented facility which focuses on early childhood care and education. CRRU provides public education and policy analysis; consults on child care policy and research; publishes papers and other resources; maintains a comprehensive resource collection and computerized catalogue; and provides online resources and research through its website: ([www.childcarecanada.org](http://www.childcarecanada.org)).

### *Occasional Paper Series*

- No. 1 Child Care for Canadian Children and Families: A Discussion Paper
- No. 2 Proceedings from the Child Care Policy & Research Symposium
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### *Other Publications from the Childcare Resource and Research Unit*

- A Survey of First Year Early Childhood Education Students\*
- Assessing Community Need for Child Care (Guide & Sample Questionnaire) \*
- Flexible Child Care in Canada: A Report on Child Care for Evenings, Overnight & Weekends, Emergencies and Ill Children, and in Rural Areas
- Child Care Policy in Canada: An Annotated Bibliography
- Child Care in Canada: Provinces and Territories 1993
- Child Care in Canada: Provinces and Territories 1995
- Early Childhood Care and Education in Canada 1998: Provinces and Territories
- The Benefits and Costs of Good Child Care: The Economic Rationale for Public Investment in Young Children

### *Fact Sheets and Summaries*

- Child Care Vouchers: What Do We Know About Them?
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- Values & Beliefs in Caring for Babies & Toddlers
- A Framework for Quality: A European Perspective
- The Rights of Young Children
- Statistics Summary: Canadian Early Childhood Care and Education in the 1990's\*
- Spending on Regulated Child Care under the National Child Benefit

### *Videotapes*

- In the Public Interest: The Benefits of High Quality Child Care\*
- Child Care by Design
- Good Child Care, Healthy Child Care

\* Indicates item available in French.