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The Case for Universal Childcare in Canada

Childcare: the struggle that most parents of young children face. Where will the kids be, and in whose hands? The debate about childcare is one that is still very much alive across Canada, as the country faces significant disparities across the provinces, between those who can and cannot afford childcare. This, in turn, creates a variety of stresses and tensions for parents wishing or needing to return to work, but lacking a safe space to keep their children. This paper will analyze the direct link between the existence of affordable childcare and the rights and equality of women,¹ and take a look at the Quebec and Swedish childcare systems. First, a brief look back at the history of attempts to implement a national childcare system in Canada.

History of National Childcare Initiatives in Canada

Efforts to create a national childcare program have been in place since the 1970s, however none have come to fruition. The Royal Commission on the Status of Women was the first to suggest a national program be established in the 1970s. Indeed, the 1970s was the first time that a public system of free universal day care was mentioned. However, this was still a relatively radical idea that was seemingly at odds with the mainstream position that childcare should be an emergency welfare service at the disposal of *needy* mothers. This was because the concept of the working mother was still not accepted as a social norm at this time.¹

During the next decade, in the 1980s, the focus shifted onto who should provide day care services as well as funding and administration of such programs. In particular, the debate of private vs non-profit care dominated the conversation. In 1986, the Task Force on Childcare led by sociologist Katie Cooke was established with the mandate of assessing the need for childcare and paid paternity leave. However, before the Task Force was able to complete its work, the Liberals lost the 1984 election, and were replaced by the Progressive Conservatives who embarked on their own endeavours, and the report by the Task Force was put aside.²

¹ Throughout this paper, any mention of women in relation to childcare also includes transgender women and non-binary people. We also acknowledge that men and trans men who parent are also disadvantaged by the lack of affordable childcare options in most of Canada. But historically and still today, women bear most of the burden of childcare.

In the 1990s, the topic of childcare was largely off the political radar. The exception to this was the Quebec province, as they introduced their \$5 a day program in 1997, making it the first and only provincial childcare program in the country.³

In 2004, as the Multilateral Framework Agreement on Early Learning and Childcare was negotiated by the federal and provincial governments, former Prime Minister Paul Martin pledged a budget of \$5 billion on a childcare agreement with the provinces, to support “a truly national” childcare plan.⁴

However, this was short lived, as in 2006, former Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the Conservatives put an almost complete stop to the discussion on childcare and instead, created a \$100 a month Universal Childcare Benefit, claiming this would allow parents more “choice”.⁵

In 2015, as part of the election campaign, the Liberals pledged “to create a new national early learning and child-care framework, to ensure that affordable, high-quality, fully inclusive child care is available to all families who need it.” In 2017, the federal government claimed it would spend \$7 billion to create 40,000 new childcare spaces over a decade to increase support for both early learning and child care across Canada. The amount of \$50 million was reserved for 2017-18. Furthermore, the annual amount is expected to increase with each passing year, topping out at \$870 million in 2026.⁶ However, the main criticism that resulted from this pledge was that the element of universality is absent. Who would benefit and at what frequency were amongst the plethora of queries that have yet to be answered. Needless to say, many wrinkles need to be ironed out before concrete results become apparent.

Women’s Rights and Equality Depend on Affordable, Accessible Childcare

Analysing the current state of childcare in BC is the organisation West Coast Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF). They argue that current childcare services available to families are grossly insufficient and underwhelming. Indeed, the lack of adequate care cruelly favours “high-income” families, and therefore has a serious impact on the human rights of women who do not fall within the “high-income” population.⁷

The first negative impact on women is economic insecurity. It is a sad reality that some patriarchal traditions remain prevalent in our societies, such as women being the primary caregivers of children. The burden of childcare therefore falls on the shoulders of women. Without the availability of affordable, adequate childcare, a woman cannot return to work, resulting in likely financial dependence on her husband or partner, which challenges women’s equality. A consequence of economic insecurity is the increased risk of violence against women. Indeed, financial dependence on a husband or partner can result in a woman becoming entrapped in a situation where she feels she cannot survive without her husband or partner, and may discourage her from fleeing an abusive situation, or sometimes, forces her to return to one.⁸

Furthermore, particular demographics of women face increased challenges, such as women with insecure immigration status and women with disabilities. The YWCA works with Mothers Without Legal Status – women who have fled abusive situations in their home countries and are stripped of any legal status if their sponsorships have been withdrawn by former partners or husbands. Consequently, these women resort to working illegally to provide for their children, making them vulnerable to sanctions or the risk of being removed from Canada. Disabled mothers are subject to unequal challenges to employment, increased risks of unstable employment, and involvement

with the child protection system, among other issues, all of which result in them being less financially stable and can also pose serious risks to their personal health.⁹

Provincial Childcare Plans

To this day, Canada remains one of the few advanced countries in the world without a comprehensive and egalitarian childcare system that would allow all parents to return to work with peace of mind. If consecutive federal governments have thus far been unwilling or unable to come up with a plan, what have individual provinces done?

One province that is in the process of overhauling its childcare services is British Columbia. In 2018, the BC government committed over \$1 billion to their new Childcare BC plan over 3 years. This is enough to make substantial progress towards realization of the popular \$10 a Day Child Care Plan, a subsidized childcare plan developed and advocated by the Coalition of Childcare Advocates of BC. The new Child Care BC program will create 24,000 new licensed spaces over the next three years, reduce parent fees by up to \$350/month, provide an additional income-tested affordable child care benefit, and develop a strategy that addresses fair compensation for Early Childhood Educators. The government has also assured Indigenous communities that they would have the autonomy to design and create their own childcare services in keeping with their cultures, as well as their human and constitutional rights. While the programme in BC seems to be an interesting proposal, it has yet to show its true potential in practice.¹⁰

In Ontario, Liberals are promising free preschool childcare in 2020. There would be free licensed care for preschool children in two years under a \$2.2-billion Liberal government plan. The initiative, explained Premier Kathleen Wynne, would start in 2020, and would fund the cost of full-day, licensed child care starting once children turn 2.5 and continue to cover their care costs until they become eligible for full-day kindergarten.¹¹ However, this plan may never come to fruition, depending on the election results.

Quebec's Childcare Program: Affordable and Popular

Quebec stands in stark contrast to the rest of Canada, as the only province with a government-established childcare program. Indeed, Quebec's childcare system is vastly popular and much more affordable than systems in most areas in Canada.

This is due to significant public funding, which allows for a flat fee set at \$7.30 a day up to \$20 a day at child care centres, family child care homes, and child care in schools, as well as for infants all the way up to children of school age in facilities called "reduced contribution spaces." The system also includes a database known as the Childcare Establishment Locator, which eases the task of finding an adequate establishment with convenient distance, hours and amenities that suit the individual needs of families.¹²

Sweden: Best Childcare System in the World

Around the globe, many variations of childcare exist. However, Europe and in particular the Nordic countries are consistently ranked amongst the best countries in the world in which to have children. Indeed, according to the World Economic Forum, Sweden is deemed to be the country with the best parental support systems. Sweden has the world's longest paid paternal leave, with parents having a total of 480 days leave allowance, of which 390 are paid 80%, and the last 90 are paid at flat rate. Furthermore, parents can split this leave equally, which means that fathers are

encouraged to play a bigger role in childcare, thus allowing for women to return to work as and when they wish to.¹³

Additionally, children in Sweden are not obligated to attend school until age six; however, the government finances three hours of preschool a day for parents who want to put their children in care. Parents with children younger than eight who have not finished their first year of school are allowed to decrease their working time by up to 25%, i.e., working six instead of eight hours a day. This allows parents the flexibility to drop and collect their children at school or to care givers and be home before their children go to bed.¹⁴

Conclusion

Childcare in Canada is a topic surrounded by much contention. Other than Quebec, all other provinces in Canada remain without an affordable childcare programme. This has serious repercussions for women's equality and rights, although the BC government's recent budget to support a new childcare program is a step forward. Nevertheless, European countries seem to have "cracked the code" much sooner when it comes to affordable childcare and are consistently at the top of the charts for quality of family life. The question that remains is: What can Canada learn from the models that exist globally?

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