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Women and Choice in Child Care

Introduction

Over three decades ago, equality-seeking women put the establishment of a national child care program on the public agenda. In so doing, they were underlining the fact that in order for women to become full participants in the workforce, child care was an absolute necessity. They were also challenging the equally significant assumption that women should be the primary and unpaid caregivers of their children — a challenge that still resonates today. But despite broad public support for women's participation in the formal economy, and though a variety of policies and programs to support the provision of child care have come (and in some cases gone), Canada lacks a coherent, accessible and regulated national child care system.

There are many reasons for the absence of a national system. The shifting role of government in the last two decades has been a significant impediment to the establishment of a pan-Canadian child care program, despite key political commitments to the contrary. Up until the economic crisis in the fall of 2008, the pressure on governments worldwide to reduce spending, especially on social programs, was enormous. In Canada, this pressure was

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being applied even in the midst of billions of dollars of federal, and in some cases provincial, surpluses over nearly a decade. Though some federal dollars were finally dedicated to the explicit task of building a national child care program between 2004-2006, this effort was cut short by the election of the Conservative government in 2006.

Vocal opposition by a small contingent of stay-at-home mothers (and those who support them) has not helped. Though small in number, their opposition — amplified by many politicians and the media — has pitted women in the workforce against those primarily at home. The claim has been that a national child care program would deny support to families with a stay-at-home caregiver. Consequently, the benefits of a national child care system which could, if properly resourced, offer considerable flexibility for stay-at-home caregivers as well as part- and full-time workers, have been obscured. Amidst these allegations, a “choice in child care” discourse has emerged, undermining the child care movement’s call to use Canada’s collective resources to invest in a nationally based child care system. Instead, “individualized” income support and tax-based solutions have become the norm in most provinces.

Consequently, as Chow, Freiler, and McCuaig note in “A National Agenda for All Families: Re- Framing the Debate About Tax Fairness”:

Not knowing whether to support women as mothers, workers or both has led to a form of policy paralysis and an un-developed system of support to families with children.

Women and paid work

The lack of any real system has placed an incalculable and an unjustified burden on most families with children in Canada, and this is particularly true when it comes to women. As Minister of State Helena Guergis underlined this past March in New York at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW), one of the most significant trends in Canada in recent decades has been women's increased participation in the paid work force. Canada had one of the highest labour force participation rates for women among all OECD countries, and the highest among G-7 countries. In her country statement to

the General Assembly, Minister Guergis noted that “although [Canada] has substantially narrowed the gender gap in many areas, we still have a way to go to achieve full and equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men.”

According to *Women in Canada 2005: A Gender-based Statistical Report* by Statistics Canada, women with children have shown a particularly sharp increase in employment rates in Canada. In 2006, 64% of women with children under three and 69% with children between three and five were engaged in paid work. In 1976, the employment rates for such women were 28% and 37% respectively. The vast majority of these working mothers hold full-time jobs. Many women have breaks in their work history, largely due to child bearing and caring. One-half of these women return to work when their youngest child is 12 to 47 months; one-third return when the child is between six and 12 months. By comparison, 67% of fathers return to work when their child is less than one month old.

Approximately 40% of women in Canada, compared with less than 30% of men, are in part-time, contract, or other non-standard work arrangements (including temporary or multiple jobs) which are less likely to have pensions and other benefits. This is not necessarily by choice, but because of child care responsibilities or the inability to find full-time work. In 2007, 21.2% of Canadian women worked part-time, compared to 6.4% of men. In 2004, 26% of women part-time workers indicated that they wanted full-time employment, but could only find part-time work.

Labour market surveys find that mothers are most likely to refuse work, promotions or transfers because of family responsibilities. As a result, not only has women’s access to employment been reduced, but so have their child care choices. Wanda Wieggers in her paper, “The Framing of Poverty as ‘Child Poverty’ and its Implications for Women”, concludes that, for many women, this has meant “a derivative dependency as a result of the socially assigned responsibility for caring labour, a lack of affordable, accessible and high-quality child care, and discriminatory or exclusionary conditions within the labour market.”

Women’s access to child care

Despite the Minister of State’s admission that women bear a disproportionate burden of child care responsibilities, the govern-

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ment of Canada continues to claim that they are meeting the needs of women through a variety of programs. These programs include a so-called Universal Child Care plan, tax credits for families with children, maternity and parental benefits, Compassionate Care benefits and targeted programs for caregivers of Veterans and First Nations.

However, as many are aware, the current mix of programs is not effective in providing child care choices to today's parents. Without a change of course, access to quality, affordable child care services will not show any signs of improvement. While the progress on child care was painfully slow prior to 2006, since that time the federal government has further cut dedicated federal child care transfers to the provinces and territories and weakened accountability requirements. In 2007, the number of regulated child care spaces in Canada grew by only 3% — the smallest annual increase to date in this decade. The lack of substantial and equitable improvements to child care services across most of Canada (outside of Québec) remains a serious concern for women and their children, their families and their communities.

According to researchers Gillian Doherty, Martha Friendly and Mab Oloman, parental choices, and especially women's choices, are severely limited when regulated child care is not affordable or available. In such situations, parents must resort to less than ideal options including: using unregulated care; having one parent, or the lone parent, remain out of the paid work force or work only part-time in order to be home to care for the children; organizing different work shifts which enables one parent to be at home at all times; or leaving the child unattended or in the care of an older sibling.

Doherty and her colleagues point out that unregulated family daycare providers are less apt than their regulated counterparts to provide a back-up caregiver. As a result, parents, and often mothers, are left scrambling to find care for her child(ren) if/when the provider falls ill or is unavailable for other reasons.

Child care as a human right

The constraints on women's choices when it comes to child care fly in the face of a key UN Convention on women's equality to which Canada has been a signatory for over twenty-five years: the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of

Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The federal government is on record as stating its commitment to ensure compliance within Canada with its international commitments under CEDAW. CEDAW has the standing of a “legally binding covenant,” as acknowledged by the Secretary of State (Status of Women) in 1995. Article 11.2 (c) of this Convention states that signatories should take appropriate measures to:

encourage the provision of the necessary supporting social services to enable parents to combine family obligations with work responsibilities and participate in public life, in particular through promoting the establishment and development of a network of child-care facilities.

Women as workers in child care

The absence of a child care system with consistent investments has also significantly shortchanged women as workers in the field of child care which is subject to low wages and some job insecurity. In their series of child care report cards released in 2008, the Canadian Labour Congress noted that minimum average wages for trained/certified child care staff in centres ranged from \$9.25/hour in PEI to \$14.23/hour in Manitoba. Further, research conducted by Doherty, Friendly and Oloman suggests that when there are funding cutbacks, as there have been of late, centres are under pressure to conserve resources, including critical program materials. Staff are often asked (or volunteer) to assume additional tasks not directly related to caring for children.

Regulated caregivers also face the reality that as the number of children per caregiver is increased, there is a risk that the caregiver’s capacity to provide individualized attention is often compromised by the pressures to attend to several children at once. Caregivers, who have received considerable training in child development, know what constitutes the components of quality care-giving and report increased stress when the number of children per caregiver is increased.

This said, Doherty, Friendly and Oloman emphasize that working in a child care centre provides workers with some predictability in terms of working hours and access to some benefits such as vacation time. Unregulated family daycare providers, on the other hand, often work longer days, have limited or no bene-

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fits, and experience the stress of providing care without any back-up support. These unregulated providers are also at the mercy of the market and, as a consequence, their earnings may fluctuate based upon the demand. Some family daycare providers have reported that they are likely to spend as much as 40% of their earned income on direct work-related costs such as food and program supplies.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that countries around the world have invested heavily in national child care programs, Canada — one of the wealthier nations throughout the past decade — has lagged significantly behind. The recent period during which child care was on the national political agenda (2004-2006) constituted a significant breakthrough for the child care movement. The subsequent election of a Conservative government in 2006 — which partly campaigned on a child care platform — underscored that Canadians continue to care about child care. However, different proposals regarding Canadians' child care needs have become increasingly politicized and are seen to represent competing values about the family and women's roles in particular. Until a national child care system is truly understood for what it is — a strategic and long term investment in women, families and future generations — the struggle for the establishment of a national child care system will continue.

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