



## International Women's Day 2015

### **Time for a New Normal: Women in Canada Need Child Care**

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It's International Women's Day, a time to celebrate women's achievements and also to reflect on the barriers to equality that remain in place. Removing one of those barriers—the struggle to access quality child care—could be just one election away.

Everyone benefits when parents can go to work knowing that their children are safe and well cared for. Parents benefit because they can take on better jobs and balance work and family responsibilities. Kids benefit because they have a safe place to learn, grow and play.

The economic benefits of child care are well-established, or as the TD Bank stated, “Unquestionable”. According to their report, “Ultimately, investment in early education can help to address core economic and social challenges facing Canada. It can help reduce poverty, address skills shortages, and improve productivity and innovation, and a host of other national priorities”.

Child care is a necessary ingredient to helping make women available for work, education and training. We have seen the success of Quebec's child care system, which saw substantial increases in women's participation in paid work as well as a reduction in poverty rates. And Quebec has also shown us that money spent on child care pays for itself in increased tax revenue and other socio-economic benefits.

But even though it's normal for moms to work outside the home (70% of mothers with kids under 6 do), good child care in Canada is hard to find, and even harder to afford.

Over the last two years, Canada's labour movement has been talking to our members about their experiences finding, juggling and paying for child care. We have heard some incredible stories, ranging from the absurd to the tragic.

Like the postal worker, a new Canadian who couldn't find child care she could afford and had to send her children back to Nigeria to be cared for by her parents until they were old enough to go to school. Or the lone-parenting mom who relies on the school bus commute as after-school care because she can't afford the fees, and races at the end of the day to meet the bus.

Often when people talk about child care, they use words like “luck”, as in “I was lucky to get in” or “I feel like I won the lottery, getting this space”.

Surviving the child care years has become a normal part of family life. It's something parents are all expected to endure.

We need a new normal. Getting safe, affordable, quality child care should not be a matter of luck. It should be a matter of course.

In 1984, the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment, headed by the current Supreme Court Justice Rosalie Abella, said that, "child care is the ramp that provides equal access to the workforce for mothers".

Why hasn't government policy and support for child care kept pace with working women?

During the second world war, the federal government showed leadership by striking agreements with the provinces to establish day nurseries in areas where mothers "live, not where they work". The facilities provided healthy meals, qualified staff and aimed to "inculcate ideals such as independence, cooperation and responsibility [using the] latest methods in child psychology to achieve this end". Unfortunately this support ended once the war was over.

The [Royal Commission on the Status of Women](#) (1970) was the first to propose a national child care program. Since then there have been three major attempts by federal governments to develop a national child care strategy, countless studies, reports, several national conferences over three decades (most recently this past November), all devoted to examining child care as a public good and recommending federal leadership to work with the provinces to make it happen.

That's a lot of time. Generations of children, generations of parents, all kept waiting for real options that would help working parents balance work and family life. Women's careers have changed over the decades. Workplaces have changed. But our child care system has not kept pace.

It's time for change. We need a government that will commit to financing and to working with the provinces and territories to establish a real, universal child care system. One that will ensure new spaces really do open up, and one that addresses sky high fees.

What we don't need is more of the same plan that keeps taking us back in time, rewarding high-income families where one parent stays at home with tax breaks, while offering taxable handouts to everyone else (money that does not even remotely approach the cost of child care... if you can find it).

Canada's labour movement has made many gains for working women—gains we celebrate on International Women's Day. From maternity and parental leave to public pensions, from equal pay to workplace safety legislation, unions have led the way for better, fairer workplaces for all women in Canada. Now the labour movement is calling for a national child care system so all parents can count on quality child care when they return to work.

And, that national child care system could be just one election away. Help us get there. Together with child care advocates, Canada's labour movement will be part of a week of action from May 10 to 17, 2015; a week when we will celebrate child care as a public good and call for a system that will provide all families with high quality care at a fee every family can afford.

Join us. Because a new normal for working women and their families could be just one election away.

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