

‘Don’t mess with moms. Get it done’: 50 prominent Canadian women urge party leaders to prioritize child care

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A national child-care plan with affordable rates is essential to Canada’s economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, reads an open letter co-signed by 50 prominent Canadian women.

The letter, released in the final week of Canada’s 44th federal election, calls on all party leaders and candidates to make child care a national priority, highlighting the need for politicians to address a long-standing gap in the road to economic prosperity for Canadian mothers.



“It’s simple: Canada won’t return to pre-COVID prosperity levels if moms can’t go to work. And moms can’t go to work without better child care,” the letter reads.

“Any economic recovery plan is no plan at all unless it includes a child-care plan.”

The letter is co-signed by a range of distinguished figures in Canadian business, politics, academia and media. Among them are child welfare advocate Cindy Blackstock, former deputy prime minister Sheila Copps, columnist and former Crown prosecutor Sandy Garossino, senior counsel at Enterprise Canada Supriya Dwivedi, economist and Toronto Star columnist Armine Yalnizyan and former Ontario premier Kathleen Wynne.

The signatories, led by Kate Graham, a professor and Liberal candidate in London, Ont., say they want all leaders and candidates to commit to affordable and accessible child care before the Sept. 20 election.

“We would say, ‘it’s time’ but it’s been ‘time’ for a long time,” the letter reads. “Don’t mess with moms. Get it done.”

The fight for a national child-care plan intensified during the pandemic as the economy suffered an alarming drop in female employment. Since February 2020, roughly 177,000 women dropped out of the labour force, compared with 51,000 men. According to an RBC Economics study, women’s participation in the labour force fell from a historic high to the lowest level in more than 30 years during COVID-19.

Female employment nearly returned to pre-pandemic levels in August following lifted restrictions across the country, but the figure remains considerably lower than male employment: 56.7 per cent of women aged 15 or older have jobs compared to 64.4 per cent of men, according to Statistics Canada.

Affordable child-care programs boost female participation in the labour force, says Lindsay Tedds, an economist at the University of Calgary and one of the letter's signatories.

"Mothers need the ability to make a real choice between where they are going to allocate their human capital: at home with the kids, or working full time. Right now they don't have that choice," said Tedds.

A study from Deloitte on the economic impact of investing in early childhood education shows that serious investment in high-quality child care will boost economic growth while reducing poverty and drastically improving education levels among young kids.

The signatories of the letter say affordability is key. In Toronto, where daycare fees are among the most expensive in Canada, families are paying an average of \$22,000 per year for each child in licensed daycare, according to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

In Quebec, the only province with a universal child-care program, the effect on the economy has been largely consistent since it was implemented in the late '90s. While the program has a shortage of space, and advocates say provincial governments have not invested enough, the province has nonetheless seen a steady decline in poverty, a rise in women's workforce participation, and fewer mothers dependant on social assistance.

The federal election has put Quebec's program at the centre of political debate, with the Liberals committing \$30 billion to implement the province's model in the rest of the country if re-elected. Federal Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau has pledged that the system will see average fees for regulated child care cut in half by the end of 2022, and result in \$10-a-day care by 2026.

The Conservatives, meanwhile, have offered a \$2.6-billion counterproposal for refundable tax credits for child-care expenses that would cover up to \$6,000 per family earning less than \$150,000.

A report from the CCPA recently found that a Toronto family paying full fees for a child in licensed daycare could save \$10,000 more per year under the Liberal child-care plan than with the Conservatives' tax credit.

Still, the child-care issue only reaches so far. The parties' proposals were only briefly mentioned in the English-language leaders' debate last week. When Abacus Data asked potential voters which issues would determine how they vote, only four per cent said "making child care more affordable."

"I expected there to be more of a national conversation around this issue, but I don't feel like it has really been top of mind," said Kim Furlong, CEO of the Canadian Venture Capital & Private Equity Association, and a co-signer of the letter.

"Ultimately, I don't give a lot of credence to platform promises. We're waiting to see how these parties will act in office, and the letter we wrote is to imply that we'll be paying attention, even after the election."