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MOTHERS WHO WANT TO WORK:
HOW CANADIAN PUBLIC POLICY FAILS MOTHERS OF YOUNG CHILDREN

By

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ABSTRACT

Women in Canada are still overwhelmingly the primary caregivers for their young children. For many mothers, this means that they will take time out of the workforce at some point in their career to raise their children. Before their first baby is born, Canadian mothers will begin making difficult decisions about their careers and new family roles as the two roles often conflict. These decisions about work and family are made more difficult by Canadian public policy that is failing to respond to the needs of young families. Women who have two or more children suffer the most due to the costs and lengths of leave associated with more than one child. As a result of gaps in Canadian public policy, many women are staying home when they may prefer or need to be in the workforce. The reasons that women are staying home include personal choice, parental/paternity/maternity leave policy, the high cost of daycare, and a lack of family-friendly work options. The impacts of these policies on women are profound and long-lasting; they include financial, vocational, and emotional impacts as well as gender role implications that could be alleviated through changes to Canadian public policy. These changes would provide better support for all women and particularly those who have more than one child.

Women in Canada are still overwhelmingly the primary caregivers for their young children. For many mothers, this means that they will take time out of the workforce at some point in their career to raise their children; in Canada, 90% of mothers took time off from work after giving birth (Findlay and Kohen, 2012). Mothers are still often torn between their personal and professional lives, making difficult decisions about their careers and family roles as the two roles can both be highly demanding and often conflicting (Slaughter, 2012). These decisions about work and family are made more difficult by Canadian public policy gaps that directly affect women, and specifically women who have more than one child. This paper explores the ways in which Canadian public policy shapes women's decisions about returning to work, factors that are explored include personal choice, parental/paternity/maternity leave policy, the high cost of daycare, and a lack of family-friendly work options. This paper also asks what the financial, vocational, emotional and gender role implications of Canadian public policy are for women with more than one child.

Women with Two or More Children

Men who have two or more children do not experience the same penalties and may actually experience career advantages by having wives who stay home (Kricheli-Katz, 2012). The number of children that a woman has is important, as research suggests that women with two or more children are statistically less likely to be actively participating in the workforce than women with one or no children. A recent Australian study indicates that women who have three children are 10% less likely to be active in the workforce than women with two children (Huffington Post, 2011). Similar data exists in Canada, as will be demonstrated below, with women of young children being less likely to participate in the workforce than women with no or older children. This paper references research that focuses primarily on women who are heterosexual, well-educated, and in monogamous relationships with the fathers of their children. The limits on this paper are not meant to be discriminatory but are merely meant to be practical.

Why Women Stay at Home

Canadian women are increasingly well-educated and in Canada the majority of Canadian university graduates are women (Parsons and McMullen, 2009). Despite these high levels of education, women are still not succeeding in the workplace to the extent that men are; one reason for the lack of success women experience can be found in their roles and consequent time out of the workplace as mothers (Hewlett, 2007). Canadian women are staying home to raise their children; some do it out of personal choice or what the media depicts as personal choice, while others may stay home as a result of maternity/parental leave policy, daycare that is prohibitively expensive, and workplaces that do not or will not offer the flexible job options that parents of young families require (Marshall, 1999; Williams, Manwell and Bornstein, 2006).

Personal Choice

Some women embrace the opportunity to raise their children and work as full-time moms or to balance care for their young children with care for their elderly loved ones. Articles such as the "Opt Out Revolution" by Lisa Belkin show that highly educated women in the United States are more often choosing to stay home despite their careers and credentials. Belkin quotes one woman as stating that "maternity provides an escape hatch that paternity does not. Having a baby provides a graceful and convenient exit" (Belkin, para. 5, 2003). Other women genuinely feel that family is their life's top priority, and as such, choose to leave their careers to stay home with their children (Stone, in Ruben and Wooten, 2007). That women are simply "choosing" to stay home rankles some critics, who suggest that portraying successful women as choosing to stay home is a very limited view on women's reality. Women's "choice" to stay at home is very often influenced by multiple factors and is very rarely a matter of simple "choice" (Stone and Lovejoy, 2004).

Williams, Manwell and Bornstein (2006) suggest that the “opt out” phenomenon, that is, successful career women choosing to stay home to raise their families, only represents a handful of women, as “affluent white-collar jobs are only held by approximately 8% of American women” (p. 6). Stone and Lovejoy (2004) add to this claim, indicating that “only five of the women surveyed” – 16% of the sample – expressed “a relatively unconstrained choice or preference to become full-time, stay-at-home mothers” (Stone & Lovejoy, p. 66, 2004). According to research, there are several other factors which directly or indirectly lead to women staying at home with their children. Some of these factors can be linked to gaps or failures in public policy, including Canada’s parental leave policy, daycare costs, and a lack of legislation supporting family-friendly work arrangements (Marshall, 1999, Williams, Manwell and Bornstein, 2006).

Parental Leave Policy

While women are increasingly earning salaries that are more comparable to men, the wage gap is still significant: women ages 25-34 are earning 70% of what their male counterparts are earning (Stats Canada 2006). If a family is faced with the financial decision of one parent staying home to raise the children and the other returning to work, the rational choice from a financial perspective would be the lower earning parent staying home with the children. Family finances are highly influential in determining who will stay home from work; men who earn the same salary as their wives are 2.5 times more likely to apply for parental leave benefits (Marshall, 2009). Currently in Canada eligible mothers can take 15 weeks of non-transferable maternity leave and 35 weeks of transferable parental leave. According to Statistics Canada, most (90%) eligible mothers took leave for an average of 44 weeks after the birth of their children (Findley and Cohen, 2012). This is in comparison to eligible fathers, of whom only 20% took parental leave, with an average duration of only 2.4 weeks (Findley and Cohen, 2012). The uptake of parental leave by fathers is relatively low compared to that of Scandinavian fathers,

where non-transferable paternity leave combined with high wage replacement rates encourage fathers to stay home with their young children (Marshall, 2009). Maternity leave policy in Canada, while good intentioned, is still more likely to encourage women to stay home than men, a problem that has been encountered in other parts of the world.

Policy that is designed with the “good intentions” of allowing women to stay home longer with their children has been shown to have a negative impact. Studies in Germany and Italy have found that despite having paternity leave, the low rates of pay for paternity leave combined with the lengthier maternity leave increase the likelihood of women being “excluded” from the labour market (Estes, 2011). In France, extended leave policy has been adjusted to include the birth of the second child, which was meant to protect mothers’ wages and jobs if they have more than one child consecutively. This policy, however, has shown to increase the wage penalty for mothers at a rate of 10% per year (Meurs, Pailhe, and Ponthieux, 2010). The benefits of increased leave compensation amounts and offering father-specific parental leave combine to form a powerful incentive for men to stay home. Canadian policy that encourages father-specific leave could help to reduce the likelihood that women with two or more children will remain at home for financial reasons while their children are young because men will be more likely to participate in a portion of the leave, as seen in Sweden (Marshall, 2009). Another way to alleviate this burden is through subsidized daycare.

Daycare Costs

Daycare costs for two or more children can be a major factor in a woman’s decision to return to work (Yang and Rodriguez, 2009; Williams, Manwell and Bornstein, 2006). In Canada, many families can find the costs of daycare prohibitive (CBC News, 2012). Many women simply choose to stay at home with their children, or return to work only to see very little of their wages come home with them as a result

of the high cost of daycare. The choice can have long-lasting career or financial implications. In Canada, average provincial daycare costs range from the lowest (publically funded centres only) of \$140 per month in Quebec to the next lowest of \$360 per month in Newfoundland and Labrador, to a high for Ontario of \$783 per month per child (CBC, February 2005). The current average in Alberta ranges from \$950-\$1200 per child per month (Government of Alberta, 2011). In the United States, “lack of adequate non-family child care clearly plays a central role in driving women out of the workforce and into economic vulnerability. That’s why so many other industrialized countries have been so attentive to creating a good system to provide families with good options for non-family care” (Williams, Manwell and Bornstein, p. 40, 2006).

The Province of Quebec is a good example of how publically-funded childcare can increase women’s participation in the workforce. Fortin, Godbout and St-Cerny (“Impact of Quebec’s” n.d.) found that the introduction of publicly-funded daycare in Quebec led to a statistically significant increase in the labour force for women with children, as well as an 81% increase in single mothers’ real income between 1996 and 2008 (the period after the introduction of subsidized daycare). In other nations, such as Denmark, an increase in the cost of childcare has a statistically “significantly negative” impact on women’s labour force participation (Simonsen, p. 572, 2010). Canada’s public policy on subsidized childcare currently helps keep women with children, and specifically those with two or more children, out of the workplace. Subsidized daycare would help to make the financial choice for women to return to work an easier one, increasing their job tenure and keeping their careers on track, if their pre-children careers were still a viable option; a lack of family-friendly workplace policies may exclude women with children from work.

Family-Friendly Work Options

In many European nations, parents are entitled not only to maternity and parental leave, but also to a reduced-hours work schedule for up to three years after they return to work; the parent is also then entitled to a position similar in pay and hours to the position that they held prior to the birth of their child (Hegewisch, 2009). Flexible, part-time working hours with a guarantee of return to previous status provide a much more family-friendly work environment. To date, Canada provides job protection status for maternity and parental leave, but does not offer any policy mandating flexible or part-time hours for parents of young children (Fudge, 2006). This situation is problematic, primarily to women with two or more young children, because Canadian women are more often than men being forced to take unprotected part- or flex-time positions and also the majority of the domestic and child-rearing work (Fudge, 2006). Statistics Canada states that “women, in fact, are far more likely than men to work part-time because of child care or other personal or family responsibilities. In 2004, a total of 18% of employed women said that they worked part-time either because of child care or other personal or family responsibilities, compared with only 2% of males employed part time” (Statistics Canada, p. 109, 2006). For women who cannot access a part-time position, these inflexible workplaces are cited as one of the main reasons for mothers not to return to work (Williams, Manwell and Bornstein, 2006). Hewlett has written extensively about the barriers to mothers returning to the workforce and states that in order to retain highly talented women and remain competitive, “companies need to get into the business of offering serious forms of flexibility” (Hewlett, p.2, 2007). Some women choose not to work part-time because, in Canada, their seniority will not be protected if they switch to part-time hours. Buehler and O’Brian elaborate:

“Employers tend to use part-time work as a money-saving strategy and to consider part-time employees as both expendable and not worthy of investment through the provision of benefits, training, or career advancement. During times of economic stress, when both mothers and

fathers may feel a need to maximize their income, part-time work is even more likely to be a cost-saving measure for employers. Yet part-time work seems to be contributing to the strength and well-being of families. It is likely that many mothers (and probably some fathers as well) would elect to work part time if this status were recognized by employers as a legitimate approach to building a career while maintaining a healthy family life” (Conclusion, 2011).

Part-time or flex-time options based on the European model could help keep Canadian mothers active in the workforce, without risking their career. As Hewlett (2007) suggests; many careers typically “should” follow the “white male career model” in order to really take off. Mothers should not be penalized by Canadian policy for having children; they should be supported by it. By changing Canadian policy to include paid paternity leave, subsidized daycare, and part-time, job-protected options for both women and men, Canadian public policy can help to reduce the negative impacts that mothers of young children often experience.

The Impacts of Public Policy on mothers of two or more children

Despite some measures by Canadian public policy to support mothers, such as paid maternity leave and pre-child job protection regulations, many mothers in Canada leave the workforce for a period of close to one year for each child, if they return to work after the birth of their second child (Findlay and Kohen, 2012). Mothers in Canada who must leave the workforce for a period of time to raise their children may experience a wide range of negative impacts as a result. These impacts are felt in their financial well-being, career status and in their mental and emotional health.

The Wage Penalty and Financial Consequences

Since women in Canada take an average of 44 weeks of leave for each child (Findlay and Kohen, 2012), this means that for every child that a woman in Canada has, they will miss out on nearly a year's worth of work. For some mothers, returning to work when they have pre-school-aged children is not an option; one UK study of 400 women saw 20% of them decide not to return to work after the birth of their first child, and 45% of women who decided not to return to work after the birth of their second child (BBC News, 2011). Employment rates in Canada in 2004 suggest a similar situation here: women with children are still more likely to be unemployed than women without children. Women with pre-school-aged children are even less likely to be employed; in 2004, 67% of women with children under six worked compared to 77% of women with children ages 6-15 (Statistics Canada, 2006). This means that many Canadian women with young children are taking time out of the workforce and will therefore be likely to suffer the financial penalties associated with time out of the workforce.

This gap in employment combined with a decrease in women working full-time hours once they have children is well-documented and often referred to as the family wage gap or motherhood penalty. The wage penalty has been estimated at approximately 5%-13% per child for two or more children (Anderson, Binder, and Krause, 2003). Others suggest similar findings, stating that "even after controlling for differences in characteristics such as education and work experience, researchers typically find a family penalty of 10– 15 percent for women with children as compared to women without children" (Waldfogel, p. 143, 1998). The more children a woman has, the greater her wage penalty will be.

Human Capital Theory helps to explain this wage penalty. "Many neoclassical economists define human capital...as education and experience that yield a rate of return in the labor market in the form of higher wages" (Folbre, p. 282, 2012). Evidence exists that if women take only short breaks, between 6 and 12

months, they will experience a wage gap as result; this wage gap will be recovered in approximately four years upon her return to the workforce (Nielsen, Simonson and Verner, 2004). Women who take longer breaks may never catch up (Sigle-Rushton and Waldfogel, 2007). Because education and experience are linked in human capital theory, women who work fewer hours should earn less, and women who miss out on training opportunities through work will also earn less than their counterparts who have been able to acquire that specific human capital. Sigle-Rushton and Waldfogel elaborate:

“human capital theory...points out that women overall generally have lower wages than men because they have lower levels of wage-enhancing human capital such as education or training; work experience; and job tenure. Women with children tend to earn even lower wages than other women because they take more time out of the labor market when they have children, and are more likely to work part-time, and for a new employer, when they do return to work. Thus, women with children have less work experience and job tenure than other women, and men, and earn lower wages as a result” (Sigle-Rushton & Waldfogel, p. 5, 2007).

Mothers who have taken multiple or lengthy breaks from their employment decrease their human capital, hence the wage penalty that most mothers experience.

In addition to the wage penalty that can haunt mothers for their entire lives, women often experience other financial penalties for staying home with their children. As Williams, Manwell and Bornstein point out, “women who miss several years in the workplace are also missing out on pensionable earnings (p. 7, 2006). Mothers with two or more children will likely face more time out of the workforce, thereby decreasing their earning potential as well as forfeiting opportunities to save for their retirement and earn retirement income, such as Canada Pension. In addition to the financial penalties a woman will face for staying home are the career penalties that she will face.

Vocational Impacts

Many women who leave their careers for a period of time to raise their children will find themselves less marketable when they do return. If they do not leave, they may choose jobs that do not match their skill set in order to remain the workforce: “many highly educated women do leave the workforce because of children, and end up with much less desirable jobs as a result” (Williams, Manvell & Bornstein, p. 23, 2006). Some mothers choose more “female dominated” professions, which tend to favour families, while others move to part-time work; in the UK, Lavallo et al found that 85% of all mothers who return to work return to fewer hours of work, with many of these women also taking a pay cut (2008). Part-time jobs are not always the best career choice, either, as Hewlett (2007) suggests; many careers typically “should” follow the “white male career model” in order to really take off. Williams, Manwell and Bornstein (2006) agree; the “ideal worker” for high-profile jobs is someone who starts to work in early adulthood and works, full time and full force, for forty years straight. That means no time off for childbearing. Or childrearing” (Williams, Manwell and Bornstein, p.8, 2006). For women who have more than one child, this means more than one leave, and perhaps longer gaps between working periods depending on the ages of her children. These gaps, combined with the increased responsibilities of raising children can force women to choose less demanding or more family friendly work options, leaving their pre-children careers behind. The loss of one’s career can lead to other problems, such as mental health problems and loss of one’s identity.

Emotional Impacts

If women are staying at home when they would rather be at work, there can be negative emotional and social consequences to them (Ruben and Wooten, 2007). A woman who works part-time when she has young children is statistically more likely to experience better mental health than their stay-at-home counterparts; “new research shows that working mothers experience better physical and mental health

compared to mothers who stay home with their children (Buehler & O'Brian, 2011). Stay-at-home mothers are also more likely to experience feelings of loneliness (Ruben and Wooten, 2007). Mothers who are well-educated and stay at home with their young children report feeling guilty about not using their education or skills to their full extent; some women who leave careers to stay at home report feeling a loss of sense of identity (Ruben and Wooten, 2007). In addition, many women discuss feeling financially vulnerable as a result of not participating in the workforce. (Ruben and Wooten, 2007). While many women indicate that they are happy to be able to stay at home with their children, for women who would rather be in the workplace, the emotional impacts are great. Once a woman decides to return to the workforce, she may experience another set of emotional challenges related to her time at home; discrimination against mothers as a result of their time out of the workforce is not uncommon.

Despite, or perhaps as a result of, the traditional gender role of woman as mother, women who have left the workforce for a period of time often face discrimination based on their role as mother upon returning to the workforce (Lovejoy and Stone, 2011; Kricheli-Katz, 2011). Ageism is cited by some mothers as a barrier to transitioning from home to work; for many mothers this may be the result of their extended absence from work; and the more children you stay home to raise, the older you will be once you decide to re-enter the workforce (Lovejoy and Stone, 2011). Other mothers feel that they are discriminated against in hiring practices or in productivity evaluations for having, or being perceived as having, prioritized their families over their careers (Kricheli-Katz, 2011). Women who have more children at home may be seen as less reliable and less productive than those with one or no children at home. Despite society's expectations that women will still do the majority of society's reproductive work, women are penalized in the economy for their role as mothers; and the gender roles and stereotypes around motherhood are still very strong in Canada.

Gender Impacts

Canadian public policy that does not include subsidized daycare, father-specific parental leave or protected part-time employment can also serve to reinforce gender stereotypes. As discussed above, women may already experience discrimination in the workforce due to age if they take time off to raise their children. In addition to this, many mothers may face discrimination in the workplace through employer and co-worker perception of mothers as less reliable, more prone to favour their children over their work and generally less capable of completing tasks that they were capable of completing prior to having children (Williams, Manwell, and Bornstein, 2006). Society also continues to perceive women's place primarily at home with the children, since many mothers are the primary caregivers for their young children (Sallee, 2007). Traditional gender roles are further entrenched through the division of household labour when women stay home with their young children; in their 2011 study, Lovejoy and Stone explain:

“The longer women were home, the more their husband and children grew accustomed to, and sometimes took advantage of, the benefits of a full-time stay-at-home parent in their lives. About half the women indicated that their husband's dependence on them to parent and perform other household tasks continued or in most cases had increased since they quit working. The material pull of their family's increasing dependence on their presence in the home created pronounced, 'separate spheres' division of labour in the household and prompted a drift to traditionalism in family roles and values that the women found hard to resist and constrained their options with regard to work. In their new role as full-time domestic caretakers, women's options were further constrained by their loss of bargaining power. Some women observed that their husbands simply stopped helping out with household chores that became seen as their domain since they were now at home full-time” (Lovejoy and Stone, 2011, p. 640 and 641).

Maternity and parental leave that is mostly taken by women reinforces traditional gender roles in both the home and the workplace. Mothers are seen to occupy the role of mother/wife/housekeeper as their primary role whether they are in the office or at home, particularly if this is a role that they have filled during their leave. Canadian public policy that supports women in their return to the workplace could also help to reduce stereotypes around traditional gender roles; evidence for this can be found in countries such as Sweden, where public policy around young families supports equal parenting between the sexes and gender equality is high (Almqvist, Sandberg and Dahlgren, 2011).

Conclusion

Canadian public policy fails mothers of more than two children in three major ways; through maternity and parental leave policy, daycare policy and flexible work policy. The impacts that women feel as a result are manifold; including paying financial and career penalties for their reproductive work, greater mental and emotional health issues and discrimination in the workplace, as well as the entrenchment of traditional gender roles. Canadian public policy, if applied effectively, could be utilized much more effectively to keep mothers in the workforce. The economic and gender advantages to encouraging women to work are many, including increased economic productivity and gender equality, as well as healthier mothers (Ruben and Wooten, 2007; Almqvist, Sandberg and Dahlgren, 2011; Fortin, Godbout and St-Cerny, "Impact of Quebec's" n.d.). The Canadian government should implement non-transferable and more highly paid paternity leave, high quality, subsidized daycare, and family friendly work options such as those in the Scandinavian countries which allow for retained seniority over the period of the child's pre-school years.

Parental leave that focuses on men taking a substantial amount of time off to raise their children helps to alleviate the burden on women to take time off from work should they not desire to as well as

promote gender equality (Marshall, 2009). Human capital theory tells us that women who can work at seniority-protected positions while their children are young will experience less skill attrition, maintain their level of experience, and thus be more eligible for promotions (Sigle-Rushton and Waldfogel, 2007). Canadians will experience economic and social gains if women with young children are better supported in their return to work while their children are still young (Fortin, Godbout and St-Cerny, "Impact of Quebec's" n.d.).

Although Canada has made great strides in the past forty years towards protecting mothers and their rights in the workplace, it still has several ways in which to improve. Research in Canada and other nations indicates that Canadian mothers are still taking more time out of the workforce to raise children than men, and as result are paid lower wages, transition out of highly successful careers, are experiencing mental and emotional health consequences as well the furtherance of traditional gender roles (Findlay and Kohen, 2012; Williams, Manwell and Bornstein, 2006, Ruben and Wooten, 2007). Changes in public policy that support women who wish to remain in the workplace, such as changes in parental leave policy, subsidizing daycare and mandating protected part-time work will help mothers remain financially, vocationally, and mentally sound, and will increase gender equality for Canadian women.

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