

CHILD CARE IS A HUMAN RIGHT

Quality child care services help open doors for women and other equity-seeking groups, allowing them better access to the workforce, further education and greater participation in society. Children need and deserve care that gives them the best possible start in life.

As a society, we all benefit when children have the opportunity to develop their full potential. Children enrich our communities. The healthier our children, the healthier and more prosperous our society will be – now and in the future.

As more and more mothers of young children participate in the workforce, the absence of a coherent child care system in Canada is felt ever more acutely. Child care should be a right for every child and parent in this country.

In providing better access to the workforce, child care is a lifeline for low-income women and single mothers. Many families need two incomes to stay afloat, and single mothers need child care to escape the poverty trap. Immigrant women need child care in order to take language training, work and fully integrate into their new community.

Child care can help fight gender discrimination by reducing the economic penalties women pay when they become mothers. Many women drop out of the work force, or only work part-time, because they can't find the child care they need. Women should not have to pay such a high price.

Quality child care has an especially important role to play in supporting children from diverse backgrounds to grow and develop a sense of identity. Quality care should support children in fostering their social and language skills. Programs should reflect the diversity of the families they support. Children from a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered family, a family of colour or a francophone or Aboriginal family, are all entitled to opportunities that provide them a sense of community and cultural identity. Children with disabilities must also have inclusive and accessible services.

Canada must keep its promises

By signing several UN treaties upholding human rights, Canada has made concrete commitments on child care. Yet time and time again, Canada falls short of its obligations. Canada ranks last among 14 industrialized countries when it comes to funding early childhood programs, behind even the United States.

Canada is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which defines a set of fundamental rights of children as well as the obligations of governments to help families nurture and care for children. The CRC recognizes that children whose parents work have the right to child care services and facilities, and parents have the right to “assistance in the performance of their child-rearing duties,” and recognizes the benefits to children from child care as a right.

The convention says national governments must “ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children” – and that those services must provide high quality care. The convention also commits Canada to “ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child-care services and facilities”.

The convention also recognizes the right of children with special needs to have appropriate care which allows them to lead “a full and decent life...and facilitate the child’s active participation in the community.” The UN committee overseeing this convention has criticized Canada’s lack of progress towards meeting these commitments.

Canada has also signed the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). In January 2003, the UN examined how well Canada was meeting its CEDAW obligations. While the CEDAW committee applauded Québec’s child care program, it criticized Canada’s track record on child care. The committee recommended that Canada “expand affordable child care facilities under all governments, and...report, with nationwide figures, on demand, availability and affordability of child care in its next report.”

Earlier this year, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights called on Canada to recognize “the right to work of women and the need of parents to balance work and family life, by supporting their care choices through adequate child care services.”

Take action to build child care

It’s time Canada lived up to its commitments. The Conservative government has cancelled federal-provincial agreements which were a first step to a better child care system. But the fight for a cross-Canada child care program is not over. Visit www.cupe.ca/childcare for actions you can take to press the politicians to recognize the right of parents and children to child care.

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With files from the Feminist Alliance for International Action, <http://www.fafia-afai.org>