

A research brief on

Care responsibilities and work-life balance

Overview

Since 1976, the percentage of dual earner families has nearly doubled from 36 to 69%. This increase is driven primarily by women's greater participation in the paid labour market. In 2014, 58% of women between the ages of 25 and 54 were employed full-time.¹ Single mothers accounted for 81% of lone-parent families.²

The growing participation rates of women in the workforce have been accompanied by increasing demand for childcare services. Daycare provision helps mothers of young children stay in the paid labour market, and it facilitates peer socialization and school readiness.³ In 2011, almost half of parents (46%) in Canada reported using some type of childcare for their children aged 14 years and younger. Of those parents paying for childcare, 31% use home daycares, 33% opt for licensed daycare centres, and 28% enlist private care.⁴

Sources of work-family conflict

At the same time that their share of paid work is increasing, women spend twice as much time performing unpaid childcare as men (50.1 vs. 24.4 hours per week on average), and they spend more time on domestic work than men (13.8 vs. 8.3 hours per week).⁵ Canadian women also spend less time on leisure activities, and they are more likely than men to be simultaneously engaged in unpaid work.⁶ The "second shift" performed by working women is exacerbated by unrealistic cultural norms of intensive mothering.⁷ Women also make up a larger share of the "sandwich" generation, cohorts of adults who are responsible for caring for their aging parents in addition to bringing up their own children. Nearly 6 in 10 (57%) of eldercare providers are women.⁸

Expectations that workers are available 24/7, and job design that inhibits remote work also make it more challenging to accommodate caregiving responsibilities. The inflexibility of work hours and lack of schedule control in high status occupations like law contributes to women's stratification within such fields and their overall underrepresentation in such fields.⁹

Availability of licensed daycare space varies widely. Approximately 44% of all non-school-aged children in Canada live in communities where demand outpaces the supply of childcare. While large cities in Quebec and Prince Edward Island have the most availability, cities such as Kitchener and Brampton, ON and Saskatoon, SK have the lowest coverage rates.¹⁰

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Since 2000, Quebec has offered subsidized childcare for children ages 0-4, where the average cost of childcare is \$7 per day. Since the implementation of universal childcare, estimates of the increase in mothers working full-time outside the home ranges from 8 to 12%.¹¹ The median cost of full-time childcare in Quebec is four times lower than the Atlantic provinces, which have a median cost of \$541 per month. Childcare is most expensive in Ontario where the median monthly cost is \$677.¹²

Solutions to improving work-life balance and making care work more equitable at work

There are several measures employers can take to improve the work-life balance of employees and help make the division of unpaid work more equitable:

Promote fathers' involvement

Cultural norms around the male provider role make men feel uncomfortable taking extended parental leave.¹³ Employers need to encourage this more strongly. Long parental leaves have been shown to compromise women's career advancement.¹⁴ Longer parental leave for men can help reduce parental leave for women, thus getting them back into the workforce more quickly. Small and medium-sized businesses might find parental leaves more disruptive than large firms, but careful and creative planning for leaves can pay off in terms of intangible benefits such as increased motivation, loyalty and retention.¹⁵

Provide flexibility

Flexible work arrangements, such as telework and flex-time, are one mechanism that make it easier for working parents to balance the responsibilities of paid and unpaid labour. But they have to be implemented correctly and there has to be buy-in from management. Given that use of flexible work arrangements increases when managers demonstrate support—and that most employees (86%) and managers (74%) do not receive training on flexible work arrangements¹⁶—managerial training could be a key intervention.¹⁷ For example, PepsiCo executive Robbert Rietbroek suggests that senior management “leave loudly,” thereby demonstrating to junior staff that it's acceptable to work flexible hours in order to accommodate personal needs.¹⁸

Offer subsidized or on-site daycare

Larger firms can introduce on-site daycare. On-site childcare improves worker morale and enables parents to spend more time with their children.¹⁹ It also helps with employee retention.²⁰ Smaller firms can consider subsidizing childcare or offering reimbursement for “emergency childcare” in order to improve the retention of employees with caregiving responsibilities.

Change job designs

There are ways of designing employment that make it easier to achieve work-life balance. Some organizations have considered introducing a 4-day workweek. This would enable female employees to take the extra time they need with their dependents while staying on the same footing as their work colleagues. And partners of men working a 4-day workweek would be provided with the option of ramping up their own careers.²¹

Encourage change in cultural norms

In addition to workplace policy implementation, recent research points to the need to share the cognitive workload that accompanies unpaid care work. Mothers in particular are more likely to perform “invisible labour,” such as remembering birthdays, planning meals, scheduling extracurricular activities and scheduling doctor's visits, which prevents them from focusing on other pursuits.²² More attention needs to be paid to the gendered and unequal division of cognitive work that occurs in most heterosexual households.

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<https://www.gendereconomy.org/care-responsibilities-and-work-life-balance/>

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- 2** Statistics Canada, Lone parent families: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2015001/article/14202/parent-eng.htm>
- 3** Nores, M., & Barnett, W. S. (2010). Benefits of early childhood interventions across the world: (Under) Investing in the very young. *Economics of Education Review*, 29(2), 271-282. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2009.09.001>
- 4** 2011 Statistics Canada Childcare in Canada report: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-652-x/89-652-x2014005-eng.htm>
- 5** Statistics Canada, Families, Living Arrangements and Unpaid Work: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-503-x/2010001/article/11546-eng.htm#a12>
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