

Structural Barriers in Canada's Care Systems for Women in Science, Engineering, Trades and Technology

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Introduction

The central role of both paid and unpaid care, along with the systems that support them, is increasingly gaining broader recognition as a matter of public concern in Canadian society. The onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 brought the issue of care to the forefront of public discourse, highlighting the distinctive challenges faced by various social services, including early childhood education and care, long-term care facilities for older adults, and primary and secondary education. It also raised important questions around parental leave, critical illness leave, and caregiving benefits. However, as Fredman (2024) notes, the recognition of the significance of care is not a new development. Long before the pandemic, influential work by feminists, labour lawyers, feminist economists, and scholars of relational theory and care ethics had already been drawing attention to the centrality of care in our societies.

With half of all Canadians taking on the role of a caregiver at some point in their lives, collectively dedicating 5.7 billion hours each year to providing care, (The Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence, 2024), both unpaid caregivers and paid care workers are essential to Canada's economy and the well-being of Canadians (Wray et al., 2023).

Across Canada, federal, provincial, and territorial governments play pivotal roles in developing, implementing, and funding a diverse range of care-related systems. These systems include laws, policies, services, institutions, and frameworks designed to support individuals, particularly those who are vulnerable, dependent, or in need of assistance (Tronto, 2020; Duffy, 2011).

This research aims to contribute to both an environmental scan and comparative analysis of care-related structures across Canada. By focusing on maternity and parental leave, child care, elder care, and critical illness leave, the study seeks to map what exists in current legislation and policy across jurisdictions. It examines the accessibility, adequacy, and limitations of these structures in relation to the working conditions of women in Science, Engineering, Trades and Technology (SETT).

Women remain significantly underrepresented across Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields. Although 34% of Canadians with a STEM degree are women, only 23% of those actually working in science and technology occupations are women, making up less than 25% of the overall STEM workforce (Wilfrid Laurier University, 2024). According to Freedman et al. (2023), women in these fields face persistent and structural barriers that contribute to both underrepresentation and higher attrition rates. These challenges are rooted in a masculinized and exclusionary culture, where gender-related bias, sexual harassment, and the routine dismissal or undermining of women's contributions—often through behaviours such as “mansplaining”—remain common. Such a hostile environment can erode confidence and self-efficacy, even when women perform at the same level as their male counterparts, and often fuels impostor syndrome, leading many to question the legitimacy of their success.

While these issues are prevalent across STEM, they are even more pronounced in the skilled trades. Women make up less than 8% of skilled trades employees in Canada and only 14.8% of the Red Seal workforce—well below their 48.2% representation in the broader labour market. When traditionally female-dominated service trades such as cook, baker, and hairstylist are

excluded, the figure drops to just 5.2%. Only a few occupations—such as baking, painting and decorating, and select niche trades—have shown even modest gains in women’s participation, highlighting the entrenched gender divide. This gap is even wider for racialized women, trans women, newcomer women, and women with disabilities, who continue to face compounded barriers to entry, retention, and advancement in Canada’s trades workforce (Pay Equity Office, 2023).

Organizational culture plays a crucial role in shaping the landscape for women (Barkhuizen et al.,2022). Organizational culture encompasses the values, principles, norms, and acceptable behaviors that define "how things are done here" in the workplace. Organizational culture is influenced by leadership styles, organizational characteristics such as structure and history, environmental factors, and the cultural philosophy of its founders (Barkhuizen et al.,2022).

While limited research exists on the work environments in Canada women specifically, studies have shown that widespread disrespect, harassment, and exclusion are common experiences for women in many workplaces, particularly in the SETT work environments (Williams et al., 2022)

According to recent research from Statistics Canada (2024) on workplace harassment, nearly half of women (47%) across the country have experienced some form of workplace harassment or sexual assault. The most commonly reported issue among women is exposure to inappropriate sexualized behaviors (44%), followed by discriminatory behaviors (20%) and sexual assault (13%). Furthermore, women employed in occupations traditionally dominated by men, such as trades, transport, and equipment operators, are also more likely to encounter inappropriate sexualized behaviors (Statistics Canada, 2024).

Moreover, the results of a global survey of women working in STEM (Women in STEM, MyBioSource, 2023) reveals that negative work climates significantly affect women working in STEM. According to the survey, one in ten women report earning less than male counterparts in the same role, while nearly half say they’ve never been promoted. Over 50% have experienced “quiet promotions”, or increased responsibilities without pay or title increases, highlighting systemic undervaluation. Moreover, work-life balance remains elusive for many women, with the majority clocking unpaid overtime and reporting high levels of stress and burnout. Similarly, research conducted by Conrad, Abdallah, & Ross (2021) likewise revealed key challenges facing women in the field, with a striking 91% of participants agreeing that women face greater institutional and cultural barriers than men. The most reported challenges included work/life imbalance, gender bias, high stress, and unequal standards. Additionally, 31% of respondents reported not feeling represented in their field, underscoring ongoing systemic issues within STEM and SETT professions.

As women in SETT continue to face systemic barriers, including underrepresentation, rigid work cultures, and a lack of caregiving accommodations, this research hopes to identify policy gaps that disproportionately impact them and offer recommendations aimed at building more equitable and supportive care systems that enable women in SETT to manage both their professional and caregiving responsibilities without career compromise.

While this research focuses on the experiences of women in SETT the insights generated, in particular those related to caregiving structures, how those same structures often they fail to reflect the lived realities of workers across Canada, and the recommendations that follow can be relevant to all workers navigating the dual demands of paid employment and unpaid care. As care responsibilities increasingly affect people across all genders, understanding and addressing the structural barriers within Canada's care systems can help build more resilient, equitable, and supportive workplaces for everyone.

Overview of Maternity and Parental Leave Structures in Canada

Parental Leave, defined as job-protected leave of absence for employed parents after childbirth or adoption to take care of their baby (Heshmati, Honkaniemi, & Juárez, 2023), is an integral part of Canada's care-related structure and is positively associated with maternal return to work, child health, maternal mental health, and paternal involvement (Margolis et al., 2019).

Initially administered through the Unemployment Insurance (UI) program, fifteen weeks of maternity leave was first made available to working women across Canada in 1971. The federal government has periodically expanded the parental leave benefit program, primarily by increasing the duration of leave, broadening eligibility criteria, and reducing the waiting period for benefits. In 1990, the program added an additional 10 weeks of leave on top of the 15 weeks of maternity leave, which was initially only available to the birth mother. In 2001, following the transition from Unemployment Insurance (UI) to the Employment Insurance (EI) program, parental benefits were extended from 10 weeks to 35 weeks, raising the total paid maternity and parental leave time from six months to 50 weeks. By the end of 2017, the program was further extended, allowing parents to receive up to 61 weeks of extended parental benefits, providing approximately 18 months of leave (including maternity leave) at a reduced rate. This expansion also introduced more flexibility for pregnant workers to choose the start date of their maternity leave.

All Canadian provinces and territories were initially covered by the federal Employment Insurance (EI) program for maternity and parental leave benefits. However, the government of Quebec successfully gained the right to establish its own system. In 2006, The Quebec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP) was introduced to replace the provisions of the EI program for paid maternity and parental leave in Quebec, offering more generous benefits and greater flexibility for parents in the province (Laplante, 2024).

Today, as Mathieu, Doucet, and McKay (2020) note Canada has a “complex tripartite parental leave system” (171) which consists of three main components, namely job-protected unpaid leave following the birth or adoption of a child, as outlined in employment standards acts across the ten provinces, three territories, and the federal labour code, two separate parental leave benefit programs, specifically QPIP available exclusively to Québec residents and the federal EI program for what is commonly referred to as the ‘rest of Canada’ (ROC) (McKay, Mathieu & Doucet, 2016), and lastly employer-provided wage compensation benefits that supplement government programs (Mathieu, Doucet, & McKay, 2020)

The federal leave benefit program is partly aligned with provincial and territorial employment standards legislation, with each province and territory establishing its own criteria for eligibility for job-protected unpaid leave (McKay, Mathieu & Doucet 2016).

The eligibility requirements for maternity, paternity, and parental leave vary across provinces and territories, but generally, employees must complete a specific period of continuous employment with the same employer prior to taking leave. Most provinces require employees to have worked for a minimum of 13 weeks to qualify for maternity or parental leave. However, Quebec, British Columbia, and New Brunswick are exceptions, as they do not require any length of service to be eligible for leave.

The most stringent qualifying conditions for leave entitlement are found in Manitoba, where employees must have completed 7 months of continuous employment, as well as in the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and Yukon, where a 12-month employment requirement applies. For a full breakdown of the eligibility criteria across all provinces and territories, (please see appendix 1).

Across all provinces and territories, a common requirement across leave programs is the need for attachment to the labour force, with leave serving as a form of social security, providing coverage to a specific group of eligible participants. These programs are contributory wage replacement insurance systems, funded not through general revenue, but from a distinct pool of funds collected through employment insurance premiums (Mathieu, Doucet, & McKay, 2020). Accordingly, “inequalities in the labour market are translated into inequalities in the receipt of paid parental benefits” (Mathieu, Doucet, & McKay, 2020: 175).

Meaning that across Canada, specifically the ROC, low-income families are more likely to be “parental leave poor” households, with low access to paid benefits (Margolis, et al., 2019). In their article *Parental-leave rich and parental-leave poor: Inequality in Canadian labour market-based leave policies*, McKay, Mathieu, and Doucet (2016) compare mothers' receipt of parental leave benefits based on household income and program type. Their analysis reveals that higher-income families have better access to parental leave benefits in both Canada's EI program and Québec's QPIP program. The study highlights the inequalities embedded in the design of parental leave programs, where some families are "parental-leave rich" and others "parental-leave poor". These patterns of inequality are driven by both income levels and program design, particularly eligibility criteria. Moreover, the study reveals that parents without the right to job-protected, unpaid leave, face significant barriers to accessing either leave benefit program, with non-standard workers (such as part-time, contract, or precarious workers) particularly disadvantaged due to difficulties in meeting the eligibility requirements for continuous employment.

Structural Challenges for Women in SETT

For women working in SETT, Canada's parental leave system can reinforce systemic inequalities that disproportionately affect women in non-linear, male-dominated, and often precarious employment pathways.

Careers in SETT often involve delayed entry into the workforce due to prolonged periods of education, training, and credentialing. Consequently, many women enter their careers later in their lives and may therefore take maternity or parental leave during the early stages of employment, when they are least likely to meet the minimum eligibility thresholds for job-protected or paid leave. This structural misalignment disadvantages women in SETT who, despite being highly educated and trained, are often disqualified from parental benefits due to lack of labour force attachment or insufficient insured hours under the Employment Insurance system.

Policy Recommendations to Improve Maternity and Parental Leave for Women in SETT

Policy Recommendation	Policy Action	Rationale	Source(s)
1. Reform Eligibility Criteria	Amend EI and Employment Standards Acts to reduce insured hour requirements and allow non-standard workers to qualify.	Supports early-career and contract workers common in SETT who are often excluded under current rules.	McKay, Mathieu & Doucet (2016); Engineers Canada (2022)
2. Establish Sector-Specific Top-Up Programs	Create a public fund to incentivize employer-provided top-ups in SETT sectors.	SETT employers often lack internal top-up benefits, widening inequities in paid leave access.	Engineers Canada (2022); OECD (2019)
3. Mandate Wage and Career Protection During Leave	Require federally regulated SETT employers to ensure salary continuity and post-leave advancement.	Prevents “quiet penalties” such as loss of responsibilities, stalled promotions, and de-skilling after maternity leave.	MyBioSource (2023); Catalyst (2020)
4. Expand EI Wage Replacement Rates	Increase wage replacement to at least 70% and standardize benefits across income levels.	Current EI rates disproportionately deter low-income or precariously employed SETT women from taking full leave.	Margolis et al. (2019); Mathieu et al. (2020)
5. Launch Returnship and Re-Skilling Programs	Co-fund provincial/federal re-entry pathways for women post-leave in SETT careers.	Re-entry into fast-moving fields like STEM and trades is difficult without support—risking talent loss.	Government of Canada WAGE; Engineers Canada (2022)
6. Implement Gender Equity Reporting Requirements	Require employers to publish anonymized data on leave uptake and post-leave outcomes by gender.	Transparency drives accountability; data reveals systemic disparities and enables targeted interventions.	Canadian Human Rights Commission; UN Women (WEPs)

Overview of Child Care Structures in Canada

The relevant literature widely acknowledges that a high-quality, inclusive child care system is crucial for children's well-being and development, helps families afford child care while working, and drives societal progress in areas such as gender equality, workforce participation, and economic growth. Past research indicates that the widespread adoption of child care and early learning services, referred to as early childhood education (ECE) programs, not only benefits children and their families but also has a significant positive impact on the overall economy (Karoly, 2016). The expansion of access to ECE is associated with increased female labour market participation, enhanced child outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged children, and the reduction of overall inequality (Alexander, et al., 2017; Dallaire & Anderson, 2009; Van Rhijn, et al., 2021).

Historically, the Canadian federal government's responses and policy interventions did not prioritize the development of a national child care system¹. Instead, as Van Rhijn et al. (2021) describe, the government was driven by the flawed assumption that "putting money into people's pockets" would be a more effective approach, leading to child care services across the country being organized according to a "deeply entrenched neoliberal approach" and based on a "market model" (Beach, Ferns, & Shaker, 2015).

Despite the division of responsibility for social programs under Canadian federalism, where primary responsibility for early learning, preschool and child care rests with the 13 provincial and territorial governments, the federal government introduced the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) program in 2021 (Government of Canada, n.d.). Pledging to build a quality child care system in partnership with provincial-territorial governments, the federal government budgeted \$27.2 billion dollars between 2021 and 2026 to "transform" child care. Implemented through bilateral agreements between the federal government and the provinces and territories, the program has been heralded as Canada's first federal/provincial/territorial/Indigenous child care plan and has been widely welcomed by parents, policy analysts, advocates, and the child care sector (Van Rhijn, et al., 2021).

Canada's first federal child care legislation, Bill C-35, *An Act respecting early learning and child care in Canada*, received royal assent on March 19, 2024. This Act outlines the federal government's long-term commitment to early learning and child care by establishing a clear vision, goals, and principles for a Canada-wide system. It guarantees sustained and ongoing funding for partners, increases accountability through regular reporting to Parliament, and formally establishes the National Advisory Council on Early Learning and Child Care, which

¹ It is important to note that despite the fact that the Canadian federal government's responses and policy interventions did not prioritize the development of a national child care system, between 1984 and 1995, three major attempts were made to develop a national child care strategy in Canada, led by successive federal governments: the Task Force on Child Care (1984) under Trudeau, the Special Committee on Child Care (1986) under Mulroney, and Jean Chrétien's 1993 Red Book commitment. Although each recognized child care as a provincial responsibility, none succeeded in creating a pan-Canadian approach to early childhood education and care. In the mid-1990s, political changes shifted power toward provincial governments, especially with the abolition of the Canada Assistance Plan (1996) and the introduction of the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST), which combined federal funding for provincial health, education, and welfare programs (Childcare Resource and Research Unit, n.d.)

will advise the government and engage with the sector on key issues (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2024).

This legislation outlines the guiding principles for the revamped ELCC system, emphasizing affordability, accessibility in terms of availability of services, quality, and inclusivity as key pillars of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care initiative.

According to the Child Care Resource and Research Unit (CRRU) making child care affordable has been a primary focus, with the federal government setting a target of a 50% reduction in average fees for all families by the end of 2022, and an average \$10/day parent fee by 2025–2026 for all regulated child care spaces for children aged 0–5. In response, child care fees for younger children in several provinces and territories decreased even more sharply than initially targeted. By mid-2024, six provinces and territories had set their parent fees at the \$10/day target (namely Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Nunavut, and the Yukon), with some exceeding it, others using it as an average, and in a few cases, \$10/day being the maximum fee. Quebec had already implemented fee reductions prior to the Canada-wide system, with average fees under \$10 a day across Quebec.

In 2023, all jurisdictions either met or closely approached the 50% fee reduction target, resulting in increased affordability of regulated child care for many families compared to previous levels (Friendly et al., 2024). According to the Government of Canada, the gross annual savings for regulated child care per child under the Canada-wide early learning and child care system varies significantly across regions. For instance, families in Alberta can save up to \$13,700 annually, while those in Nunavut can save up to \$14,300. Other provinces and territories, such as Ontario, New Brunswick, and British Columbia, report savings of up to \$8,500, \$3,600, and \$6,600, respectively. Additionally, the Yukon and Northwest Territories have achieved substantial savings, with the Yukon reaching \$7,300 and the Northwest Territories up to \$9,120. Quebec had already implemented fee reductions prior to the Canada-wide system, with average fees under \$10 a day.

According to Friendly et al. (2024), while high parent fees have long been a major barrier to accessibility, they are not the only hurdle to child care access in Canada. A key goal of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) initiative is to make child care available to all families across Canada, which requires expanding the supply of regulated child care. In 2023 nearly half of Canada's children under school age lived in a "child care desert," where more than three children compete for a single preschool child care space, a situation worsened in rural and remote communities² (Friendly, 2023).

The federal government has emphasized that the expansion of CWELCC will focus on public and non-profit child care providers. By 2023, the number of full- and part-day spaces in regulated child care for children aged 0-5 reached 678,024, representing an increase of 50,691

² The proportion of younger children living in child care deserts varies across Canadian provinces. Saskatchewan has the highest at 92%, followed by Newfoundland and Labrador at 79%, and Manitoba at 76%. Other provinces like British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario have lower but significant percentages, with 64%, 61%, and 53% respectively. Nova Scotia has 47%, New Brunswick 29%, Quebec 11%, and Prince Edward Island has the lowest at just 4% (Friendly, 2023). Please see Appendix B.

spaces since 2021. However, coverage remains limited for certain groups, particularly infants (Friendly et al., 2024).

Friendly et al. (2024) further note that the CWELCC initiative aims to ensure high-quality child care, with the principle of "giving children the best start in life" central to its vision. Additionally, as Friendly et al. (2024) describe, inclusivity is the fourth principle of CWELCC. This principal would ensure that child care services are accessible and responsive to all children and families, including those who are marginalized, racialized, newcomers, and those with disabilities. All provinces and territories have implemented funding and policies to include children with disabilities in regulated child care, and most, except Quebec, offer individual parent fee subsidy systems to assist low-income families with child care costs. In their bilateral agreements and action plans, provinces and territories have committed to enhancing the provision of child care to underserved populations. While definitive data outside Quebec is lacking, a 2023 study by Friendly, Nguyễn, and Taylor (2023), indicates that access to regulated child care remains inequitable, with low-income, newcomer, racialized, and other marginalized groups being less likely to access these services.

Alberta

In November 2021, Alberta and Canada signed an agreement to enhance accessible, affordable, and high-quality child care in the province. This agreement, along with the Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement (June 2021) and the Early Learning and Child Care Infrastructure Funding Agreement (March 2024), further supports child care development in Alberta (Government of Alberta, n.d.).

In Alberta, ELCC encompasses a range of services, including kindergarten, centre-based child care, school-age centres, family child care (family day homes), and group family child care. Alberta Education oversees kindergarten and other Early Childhood Services (ECS) programs, including prekindergarten, which targets children needing additional support before entering kindergarten.

Alberta has developed a three-year action plan to advance its renewed vision for early learning and child care. As part of the Canada-Wide agreement, approximately \$3.8 billion will be invested in child care for children from birth to kindergarten age, including those attending both kindergarten and child care during regular school hours. Of this investment, \$3.16 billion is allocated to reduce out-of-pocket parent fees, \$185 million will support the creation of up to 68,700 licensed child care spaces by 2026, \$152 million will enhance access to equitable and inclusive child care spaces, and \$506 million will support certified educators in licensed programs (Government of Alberta, n.d.).

Alberta is focused on improving affordability by reducing parent fees for full-time licensed early learning and child care spaces. Over the course of the five-year agreement, the province aims to reduce fees by an average of 50%, which was completed in 2022. The goal is to lower average fees to \$15 per day by early 2024 and to \$10 per day by the end of March 2026.

Additionally, Alberta is working to expand child care accessibility, with plans to create up to 68,700 new licensed child care spaces by March 2026. This expansion will include both non-profit and private programs, offering flexibility such as drop-in or overnight care (Government of Alberta n.d). According to research by *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2023*, the net growth in full-day child care spaces for children aged 0-5 since the implementation of CWELCC shows continued expansion. From 2021 to 2023, for-profit spaces increased by 7,268, while non-profit and public spaces grew by 3,722. The total increase in full-day spaces was 10,990, bringing the total from 64,710 in 2021 to 75,700 in 2023

Supporting high-quality child care is another stated priority for Alberta. The province values the early childhood education profession and is committed to increasing access to the field by expanding enrolment capacity for the free Level 1 child-care orientation program from 4,000 to 10,000 spaces, which has already been completed. Alberta also plans to support professional development and training to improve certification levels for early childhood educators. In addition, the province will continue providing some of the highest wage top-ups for early childhood educators in Canada, aiming to increase the number of qualified educators in licensed child care programs. From November 2021 to September 2024, the number of qualified early childhood educators employed in licensed programs is expected to rise by 60%, from 18,100 to 29,000 (Government of Alberta, n.d).

In addition, beginning April 1, 2025, parents with children up to kindergarten age attending full-time licensed daycare facilities and family day home programs will pay a flat parent fee of \$326.25 per month, or roughly \$15 per day, while part-time care will cost \$230 per month, regardless of where a family lives in the province. In contrast to a flat monthly fee, parents with children in preschools will receive a reduction of up to \$100 off their preschool program's stated monthly child care fees (Government of Alberta, n.d). Accordingly, effective February 1, 2025, income-based child-care subsidy program subsidies will no longer be available for children up to kindergarten age attending child care during regular school hours or for children enrolled in a licensed preschool program. Critics note that many families currently paying below the flat rate will face increased costs under the new program, which could pose financial challenges for those who have been benefiting from lower fees (see, for example Tran, 2025; Bellefontaine, 2025)

British Columbia

In July 2021, the Government of British Columbia and the Government of Canada signed the Canada-B.C. Early Learning and Child Care Agreement (2021-2025) and the Canada-B.C. Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement (2021-2026), which together allocate \$3.21 billion over five years. These agreements operate alongside the previously established Multilateral Framework Agreement.

The Early Learning and Child Care Act (ELCCA), which came into effect in 2024, reinforces the government's commitment to making child care more affordable, inclusive, and culturally safe. The ELCCA introduces an annual requirement for the province to report publicly on its efforts to support affordable, inclusive, accessible, and high-quality child care. It also expands the purposes for which child care grants can be used, including establishing child care facilities, improving inclusivity for children with support needs, and developing Indigenous child care

programs, all of which aim to improve access for families. The Act confirms the role of the Provincial Child Care Council in making recommendations about child care accessibility, quality, inclusivity, and affordability.

In British Columbia, early learning and child care (ELCC) includes kindergarten, centre-based child care, and licensed family child care, all overseen by the Ministry of Education and Child Care, which took over responsibilities from the Ministry of Children and Family Development in April 2022. Full-day kindergarten is available to all five-year-olds, though attendance is not compulsory. Child care services include full-day centres, part-day preschools, and before- and after-school programs, primarily run by for-profit and non-profit operators, with some publicly operated spaces. Family child care providers are individually licensed (Friendly et al., 2024).

The province has a multi-pronged approach to government developed a 10-year plan called Child Care BC, which included a \$1.3 billion investment over the first three years. The plan includes several initiatives aimed at increasing child care spaces, reducing parent fees, and improving quality. These initiatives include capital funding for new child care spaces through the Child Care BC New Spaces Fund which since its inception in 2018 “has supported and accelerated the creation of new licensed child care, helping to bring quality, accessible, inclusive, culturally safe, and affordable child care to more families throughout BC” (Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2024).

According to research by *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2023*, the net growth in full-day child care spaces for children aged 0-5 since the implementation of CWELCC shows significant expansion. From 2021 to 2023, for-profit spaces increased by 6,654, while non-profit and public spaces grew by 1,241. The total increase in full-day spaces was 7,895, bringing the total from 58,590 in 2021 to 66,485 in 2023 (Friendly et al., 2024).

Other initiatives include the Child Care Fee Reduction Initiative which enhances child care affordability for families by offering funding, up to \$350 per month, to eligible, licensed child care providers to reduce and stabilize parent monthly child care fees. Additionally, the Affordable Child Care Benefit is a monthly payment intended to help eligible British Columbia families cover the cost of child care. The amount of the benefit varies based on each family's specific circumstances (Government of British Columbia n.d).

In addition to the fee reduction programs, the \$10 a Day ChildCareBC program is an important initiative aimed at making child care more affordable for B.C. families. The financial impact on families using \$10-a-day child care is notable, with families paying no more than \$200 per month per child for full-time enrollment during regular business hours, regardless of the type of care (Government of British Columbia n.d).

The Government of British Columbia also offers a Young Parent Program, to support parents under the age of 25 who are finishing high school. The program provides up to \$1,500 per month per child to help cover child care costs, as well as a child care space in a program located at or near the school they are attending.

In addition, British Columbia has also worked to address staffing challenges in the child care sector with a wage enhancement for early childhood educators and increased support for training. As part of British Columbia’s Early Care and Learning Recruitment and Retention Strategy, Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) working in eligible licensed child care facilities are eligible for a \$6 per hour wage enhancement. This is the fourth such wage increases since September 2018, bringing the median wage for ECEs to approximately \$29 per hour. Additionally, starting January 1, 2025, funding for statutory benefits is provided at a rate of 19.92%.

Manitoba

Manitoba signed the Canada-Manitoba Early Learning and Child Care Agreement in December 2017, which allocated nearly \$47 million over three years. This agreement was extended in 2020 and renewed in 2022, with additional funding allocated for further support

In Manitoba, kindergarten, child care centers, family child care, and before- and after-school programs fall under the responsibility of Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning. The province offers part-day kindergarten for all five-year-olds, with some areas providing full-day options. Four-year-olds may attend nursery programs in certain school divisions, though these programs are not provincially funded. Child care centers, nursery schools, family child care, and group family child care are regulated by the province, while before- and after-school programs operated by schools do not require licensing (Friendly et al., 2024).

Most child care provision in Manitoba is delivered by non-profit operators, though for-profit operators also exist. For-profit centers may accept fee subsidies but do not receive public operating funding, and there are no publicly operated child care programs in the province. According to *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2023* the net growth in full-day child care spaces for children aged 0-5 since the implementation of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) initiative shows significant progress. From 2021 to 2023, for-profit spaces increased by 234, while non-profit spaces grew by 1,116. The total increase in full-day spaces was 1,350, bringing the total from 20,721 in 2021 to 22,071 in 2023. The percentage of full-day spaces that were for-profit increased from 6.5% to 7.2%, and 17% of the total growth in full-day spaces occurred in for-profit centers.

Since April 2023, parent fees for infants and preschool-aged children in facilities receiving operational grants have been capped at \$10 per day for full-time care. Parents of children enrolled in infant, nursery, and preschool programs pay \$10 per day for regular care hours (4 to 10 hours) at licensed child care facilities that receive operational grants. For school-age children attending care during three periods each day—before school, at lunch, and after school—parent fees are also \$10 per day. Starting December 8, 2024, the province will further reduce parent fees for school-age child care on non-school days, including in-service days and school holidays, to \$10 per day (Government of Manitoba, n.d).

Manitoba also offers the Child Care Subsidy Program, which provides provincial support to eligible families by reducing child care fees for children aged 12 weeks to 12 years. Eligibility for the program is based on various factors, including income, the number and age of children, the number of days care is needed, and the reason for the care (Government of Manitoba, n.d)

New Brunswick

New Brunswick signed the Canada-New Brunswick Early Learning and Child Care Agreement (Multilateral Framework Agreement) on August 30, 2017, which was extended on August 19, 2020, with an additional \$9.7 million for the 2020-2021 fiscal year. The agreement was renewed on August 13, 2021, with \$48.1 million allocated over four years. In addition, New Brunswick signed the Canada-New Brunswick Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) agreement on December 10, 2021, which allocated \$492 million over five years. The CWELCC agreement runs parallel to the Multilateral Framework Agreement and does not replace it.

New Brunswick is a bilingual province, offering parallel English and French public education sectors, with free kindergarten available for all five-year-olds. Full school-day kindergarten is compulsory, but there is no kindergarten for four-year-olds. Licensed child care includes "designated" New Brunswick Early Learning Centres, family child care homes, undesignated centers, and before- and after-school care. As of 2024, most eligible programs are "designated." Centre-based child care is provided by both non-profit and for-profit operators, with 72% of full-day spaces managed by for-profit providers (Government of New Brunswick, n.d).

From 2021 to 2023, the total number of full-day spaces increased by 1,313, rising from 14,341 to 15,654 spaces. Of these, for-profit centers saw a growth of 1,014 spaces (from 10,182 to 11,196), while non-profit and public spaces increased by 299 (from 4,159 to 4,458). The percentage of full-day spaces that were for-profit increased slightly from 71% in 2021 to 72% in 2023. Additionally, the percentage of growth in full-day spaces that were for-profit was 77% (Friendly et al., 2024).

As of June 2022, New Brunswick has established parent fees for designated centers and family child care homes based on the Standard Parent Fee Grid which reduced parent fees by an average of 50%. These fees range from \$16 to \$21 per day for a full-day space, with variations depending on the age group and community type. To qualify for reduced fees, children must be 5 years old or younger, not attending school, and enrolled in a designated facility. The fee reduction is applied directly by the operators, and parents will pay based on the new fee grid (Government of New Brunswick, n.d).

Families with a gross annual income under \$80,000 may also benefit from additional reductions through the Parent Subsidy Program.

Additionally, some parents or caregivers could benefit from the Daycare Assistance Program, which helps families access affordable, quality child care at approved daycare facilities. The program provides financial support for daycare costs for children aged 0 to 12 but does not cover the full cost. Parents are responsible for paying the difference between the daycare fee and the approved subsidy amount. The program is administered by the Department of Social Development and is available to families meeting specific eligibility criteria, including having a preschool-aged or school-aged child enrolled in a licensed Early Learning and Child Care Centre. Eligible families must have a net annual income of \$55,000 or less and meet work or education requirements.

Newfoundland and Labrador

Newfoundland and Labrador signed the Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Early Learning and Child Care Agreement in 2017, with funding allocations extended and renewed in 2021. The agreement is aimed at increasing access to regulated child care by creating nearly 6,000 spaces by 2025-2026, while enhancing affordability, inclusivity, and quality across the province. The initiative is supported by federal investments, including \$306 million for the 2021-2022 to 2025-2026 period, a one-time investment of nearly \$6.5 million in 2021-2022 to support the early childhood workforce, and over \$34 million for the 2021-2022 to 2024-2025 Early Learning and Child Care Extension Agreement.

The Department of Education in Newfoundland and Labrador oversees the Child Care Act and related regulations, managing a range of services including regulated child care centers, family child care, and kindergarten (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2024).

Licensed child care options include full-day centers, part-day nursery schools, prekindergarten pilots, and before- and after-school programs. Family child care is primarily agency-based, with one provincial agency and a few individually licensed providers. While both non-profit and for-profit operators provide child care, 70% of full-day center spaces are for-profit. According to *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2023* The net growth in full-day center spaces for children aged 0-5 from 2021 to 2023 showed an increase of 694 spaces, with a slight decrease in the percentage of full-day spaces that were for-profit.

On March 15, 2023, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador Andrew Furey announced that families in the province are now able to access \$10-a-day regulated child care, three years ahead of the national target. This initiative is expected to save families an estimated \$6,300 per year for each child in care. Since January 2023, full-day child care fees have been capped at \$10/day, though some centers may set their own rates. Income-tested subsidies are available for eligible families. Additionally, a province-wide wage grid for child care providers was introduced in 2023, though family child care providers remain outside this structure and continue to receive the Early Learning and Child Care Supplement. The province also introduced its first pre-kindergarten centres, supported by federal funding, which will provide more children and families with access to affordable and inclusive early learning and child care options (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2024).

The Operating Grant Program (OGP) is a key component of the Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, designed to improve the affordability and accessibility of quality child care across the province. All regulated child care centers are eligible to apply for the grant, which includes a set daily rate for parent/guardian fees. Centres must comply with the Child Care Act, regulations, and quality standards.

Additionally, the Child Care Subsidy Program, an income-tested initiative, helps eligible families reduce child care costs by making regulated services more affordable, is available across Newfoundland and Labrador (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2024).

Ontario

Ontario signed the Canada-Ontario Early Learning and Child Care Agreement (Multilateral Framework Agreement) on June 16, 2017, which allocated \$434.6 million over three years for regulated child care. The agreement was extended on June 9, 2020, with an additional \$146 million for the 2020–2021 fiscal year, and again in August 2021, providing between \$146 million and \$211 million annually from 2021 to 2025. On March 27, 2022, Ontario signed the Canada-Ontario CWELCC agreement, allocating \$10.2 billion over five years. This Canada-wide agreement runs alongside the Multilateral Framework Agreement and does not replace it.

In Ontario, early learning and child care (ELCC), including kindergarten, child care centers, before- and after-school care, and regulated family child care, falls under the Ministry of Education. Kindergarten for four- and five-year-olds is publicly funded but not compulsory, with both public and Catholic schools offering the program.

The Ministry of Education licenses and regulates child care programs, which are delivered by non-profit, for-profit, and public operators. While Ontario has a long history of municipally operated child care, this sector has decreased in recent years. Non-profit organizations run the majority of child care centers and home child care agencies, with for-profit operators and Indigenous governing bodies providing the rest.

According to Friendly et al. (2024) since the implementation of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system, there has been a net growth in full-day center spaces for children aged 0-5 years. This included expanding spaces in areas with the highest demand, such as those serving children with special needs and communities like Indigenous and Francophone populations (Government of Ontario, n.d.). The number of for-profit spaces increased by 7,962, from 75,798 in 2021 to 83,760 in 2023. Non-profit and public spaces grew by 5,632, from 104,960 in 2021 to 110,592 in 2023. Overall, the total number of full-day spaces increased by 13,594, from 180,758 in 2021 to 194,352 in 2023.

For programs in the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system, Ontario implemented a phased approach to lower fees. As of April 1, 2022, fees were reduced by up to 25%, and by December 31, 2022, they were further reduced by up to 37%, bringing the provincial average fee to \$23 per day, which was 50% of 2020 fees. Starting January 1, 2025, the reduced fees were capped at \$22 per day, further lowering the provincial average to \$19 per day. By March 2026, the provincial average fee was set to drop to \$10 per day (Government of Ontario, n.d.).

In addition, families in Ontario can apply for the Ontario child care fee subsidy, which helps offset the cost of child care. The program is funded through a shared partnership between the Ontario government, municipal governments, and First Nation communities. Eligibility for the subsidy includes children under the age of 13, or up to 18 if the child has special needs and meets specific criteria. The subsidy applies to children enrolled in licensed child care programs, including center-based, home-based, or in-home services, as well as children's recreation programs, camps, and before-and-after school programs operated directly by a school board.

In January 2024, Ontario implemented wage enhancements for Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs) employed by CWELCC-participating operators, increasing wages by 19.3%, from \$20 per hour to \$23.86 per hour. This wage increase applies to both new hires and current employees earning less than \$23.86 per hour. Additionally, starting wages will be improved, and employees will become eligible for annual wage increases (Government of Ontario, 2023).

Prince Edward Island

Prince Edward Island signed the Canada-Prince Edward Island Early Learning and Child Care Agreement (Multilateral Framework Agreement) on August 29, 2017, which allocated \$10.6 million over three years. This agreement was extended on September 16, 2020, with an additional \$3.5 million for the 2020-2021 fiscal year and renewed on August 5, 2021, allocating another \$16.2 million over four years.

Since the implementation of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system, there has been a net growth in full-day center spaces for children aged 0-5. The number of for-profit spaces increased by 242, from 2,591 in 2021 to 2,833 in 2023, while non-profit and public spaces grew by 105, from 1,183 in 2021 to 1,288 in 2023. The total number of full-day spaces increased by 347, from 3,774 in 2021 to 4,121 in 2023. Despite the growth, the percentage of for-profit spaces remained steady at 69%, and 70% of the growth in full-day spaces was for-profit (Friendly et al., 2024).

On July 27, 2021, Prince Edward Island signed the Canada-Prince Edward Island CWELCC agreement, which allocated nearly \$118 million over five years. This agreement runs parallel to the Multilateral Framework Agreement and does not replace it.

Prince Edward Island's early learning and child care (ELCC) system includes kindergarten, child care centres, and family child care (referred to as family home centres), all regulated by the Department of Education and Lifelong Learning (DELL). Full school-day kindergarten is available for all five-year-olds, and part-day prekindergarten is offered at no cost to parents for four-year-olds. Kindergarten is compulsory, but prekindergarten is not.

Licensed child care programs in the province include regulated early childhood centres, designated Early Years Centres (EYCs), preschool centres, school-age centres, and family home centres. Family child care providers are individually licensed, and there are a limited number of family home centres. Child care centres are operated by both non-profit and for-profit organizations, with 73% of full-day spaces in for-profit centres. A small number of centres are operated by public entities.

Eighty-nine percent of full-day centres are EYCs, which have additional requirements beyond the standard regulations. Parent fees in EYCs have been set by the provincial government since 2010, and in January 2024, the government reduced these fees to \$10/day for all children aged 0-5 in EYCs and licensed family home centres. As of January 1, 2022, non-EYC centres also began receiving operating funding to reduce parent fees (Government of Prince Edward Island, 2023)

A parent fee subsidy is available through the Child Care Subsidy Program for eligible families, and it can be used at any licensed centre or home. EYCs have been required to use a provincial wage grid for staff since 2010.

Quebec

Since 1997, Quebec has progressively implemented a low-cost childcare system across the province. In 2018, Quebec signed the Asymmetrical Agreement – Early Learning and Child Care Component, which allowed the province to continue developing its own child care system. The agreement allocated \$262 million over three years (2017-2020), with an estimated total of \$1.2 billion between 2017 and 2028. In August 2021, Quebec signed the 2021-2026 Asymmetrical Agreement (Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Component), which allocated \$5.96 billion over five years. The CWELCC agreement runs parallel to the existing asymmetrical agreement, not replacing it. While Quebec subscribes to the general principles of the Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care, it maintains exclusive responsibility for child care within its territory.

In Quebec, early learning and child care (ELCC) includes kindergarten, regulated child care centres, family child care, and before- and after-school child care. The Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement Supérieur (MEES) is responsible for kindergarten, including full school-day kindergarten for five-year-olds, which is a legislated entitlement, and the phased introduction of kindergarten for four-year-olds. MEES also oversees before- and after-school care for children aged four to 12.

The Ministère de la Famille is responsible for centre-based and family child care. Centre-based care is provided by both non-profit and for-profit operators, with subsidized non-profit centres called Centres de la petite enfance (CPEs) and for-profit centres referred to as garderies. Parent fees for subsidized care have been set by the government since 2000, with fees for 2025 at \$8.35/day. Unfunded garderies set their own rates, and a refundable tax credit is available for parents using them (Ministère de la Famille, n.d.).

For-profit child care spaces make up 52% of the provision for children younger than kindergarten age, with the government increasingly converting unfunded for-profit spaces into funded ones. Quebec does not use individual parent fee subsidies, but some parents, including social assistance recipients, pay no fees for publicly funded care. Quebec offers 261 days of subsidized care per year, with some flexibility for seasonal or irregular work schedules. A provincial wage grid for child care workers has been in place for funded CPEs and garderies since 2006, and a substantial portion of the workforce is unionized (Ministère de la Famille, n.d.).

Saskatchewan

Saskatchewan signed the Canada-Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement (Multilateral Framework Agreement), which allocated \$41.5 million over three years, in March of 2017. The agreement was extended on June 29, 2020, with an additional \$13.7 million for the 2020-2021 fiscal year and renewed on August 13, 2021, with \$68.5 million for the next four years. On August 13, 2021, Saskatchewan also signed the Canada-Saskatchewan Canada-Wide

Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) Agreement, allocating \$996 million over five years. This CWELCC agreement runs alongside, but does not replace, the Multilateral Framework Agreement (Government of Saskatchewan, n.d.)

In Saskatchewan, early learning and child care (ELCC) programs include prekindergarten, kindergarten, child care centres, school-age child care, family child care, and group family child care, all managed by the Ministry of Education. Kindergarten is offered as part-day or full-day, and the Conseil des écoles fransaskoises provides full-day kindergarten.

Child care in Saskatchewan consists of full-day centres, family child care, group family child care, and before- and after-school care. Part-day preschools and stand-alone school-age programs are not required to be licensed. Most child care centres are operated by non-profit organizations, with a small number of public and for-profit programs, with public funding primarily available for non-profit and public facilities. Family child care providers and group family child care homes are individually licensed.

Effective April 1, 2023, all parents with children under the age of six in a regulated child care centre or home are eligible for reduced child care fees of \$10 per day or \$217.50 per month. Families with children enrolled for 10 or more days per month will pay \$217.50 per month, while those with children enrolled for fewer than 10 days will pay \$10 per day. This fee reduction applies to all children under six in infant, toddler, preschool, or school-age spaces. For children six and older, fees remain unchanged (Government of Saskatchewan, n.d.).

In January 2024, the Child Care Subsidy System was replaced with the Saskatchewan Employment Incentive (SEI) program, which provides financial support to working families with lower incomes, offering a monthly employment incentive, supplementary health benefits, access to discount bus passes, employment support, and the Saskatchewan Housing Benefit. The amount of the incentive depends on the family's income and the number of eligible children.

Additionally, beginning in October 2023, the Governments of Saskatchewan and Canada invested \$7 million to increase wages for ECE's through the Early Childhood Educator Wage Enhancement grant. The funding benefited over 90% of ECEs in the province, with wage increases ranging from \$1.50 to \$2.50 per hour, depending on the certification level. This resulted in an average wage increase of approximately eight percent compared to September 2022. The wage enhancement grant was also extended to assistants working in group family child care homes with ECE certification, bringing their wages in line with those of ECEs in child care centres (Government of Saskatchewan, 2023)

Northwest Territories

The Northwest Territories signed the Canada-Northwest Territories Early Learning and Child Care Agreement (Multilateral Framework Agreement) on February 14, 2018, allocating nearly \$7.4 million over three years. This agreement was extended in 2021 with an additional \$2.4 million for the 2020-2021 fiscal year and renewed in August 2021, with \$10.3 million allocated for the next four years. On December 14, 2021, the Northwest Territories signed the Canada-Northwest Territories Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) Agreement,

securing \$51.1 million over five years from the federal government. The CWELCC agreement runs alongside, but does not replace, the earlier Multilateral Framework Agreement.

In the Northwest Territories, early learning and child care (ELCC) programs, including kindergarten, child care centres, before- and after-school care, and family child care (day homes), are overseen by the Department of Education, Culture and Employment. Kindergarten is available for both four- and five-year-olds but is not compulsory. While five-year-olds attend full school-day kindergarten, four-year-olds may have full- or part-day options.

Licensed centre-based care includes full-day centres and before- and after-school programs. All centre-based child care in the Northwest Territories is operated by non-profit boards, municipalities, school authorities, or Indigenous governing bodies, with no for-profit centres. Family day homes are individually licensed.

In 2022, the territory began reducing child care fees by an average of 50%, increasing this reduction to 60% in April 2023, and further raising it to 74% by April 2024. Beginning on April 1, 2024, families in the Northwest Territories with children aged five years and younger attending licensed early learning and child care programs benefited from an additional reduction in their child care fees. The territorial-wide average of \$10 per day for child care, funded by both the Government of Canada and the Government of the Northwest Territories, helped make life more affordable for families with young children (Government of Northwest Territories, n.d.).

For the 2024-2025 period, approximately 74% of licensed child care fees were covered by the government through the Child Care Fee Reduction subsidy. The subsidy amounts varied by space type, with the maximum subsidy being \$760 per month for infant spaces (0 to 23 months), \$750 per month for preschool spaces (2 to 5 years), and \$175 per month for out-of-school spaces (3 to 5 years) (Government of Northwest Territories, n.d.).

Limited parent fee subsidies are available through the Income Assistance program for both licensed and unlicensed care.

Additionally, starting in 2022-2023, the Northwest Territories introduced wage enhancement through the Retention Incentive for early childhood educators in centre-based programs. The Retention Incentive (GNWT) replaces the Early Childhood Staff Grant and is provided to licensed centre-based early learning and child care program operators. The incentive is distributed based on the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) staff required to meet staff-to-child ratios under the Child Day Care Standards Regulations.

Nunavut

Nunavut signed the Canada-Nunavut Early Learning and Child Care Agreement (Multilateral Framework Agreement) on September 20, 2017, which allocated \$7 million over three years for regulated child care. The agreement was extended on August 13, 2021, with an additional \$10 million over four years. On January 24, 2022, Nunavut signed the Canada-Nunavut Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) agreement, which allocated \$61 million over

five years. The CWELCC agreement runs alongside, but does not replace, the earlier Multilateral Framework Agreement (Friendly et al., 2024).

In Nunavut, early learning and child care (ELCC) programs include kindergarten, centre-based child care, school-age child care, and family home daycares, all overseen by the Department of Education. Part-day kindergarten is available for all five-year-olds, though it is not compulsory.

Child care is provided by non-profit and public operators, including hamlets and school authorities, with no for-profit centres. Family home daycares are individually licensed.

On December 1, 2022, Nunavut became the first jurisdiction to reduce fees to \$10/day for children aged five and younger under the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) program. The program covers preschool-aged children, typically up to six years old, until they begin full-time school, usually in grade one. The \$10-a-day rate applies per child, not for multiple children. Additionally, parents may be eligible for further parental fee subsidies through the Young Parents Stay Learning Program for parents under 18 enrolled in school, and the income-tested Daycare User Subsidy, which can be combined with the \$10-a-day program (Government of Nunavut, n.d.).

Additionally, Nunavut's Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) Wage Scale Program establishes a recommended minimum wage for ELCC staff to ensure equitable compensation. The program offers contribution funding to licensed child care centres serving children aged 0-6 to help meet the wage levels outlined in the scale. The wage scale includes four categories: management, early childhood educators, program support, and centre support, with wages based on years of experience and educational qualifications, particularly for early childhood educators.

A key feature of the program is the integration of the Northern Allowance, which addresses the cost-of-living differences across Nunavut communities. The allowance, aligned with the Government of Nunavut's rates, is added as an hourly rate for all standard working hours, including vacation and sick leave. Rates vary by community and hours worked, ranging from \$7.70/hr to \$14.63/hr (Government of Nunavut, n.d.).

The Yukon

The Yukon signed the Canada-Yukon Early Learning and Child Care Agreement (Multilateral Framework Agreement) on February 7, 2018, allocating \$7.2 million over three years for regulated child care. The agreement was extended on July 2, 2020, with an additional \$13.7 million for the 2020-2021 fiscal year and renewed on August 12, 2021, with \$10.1 million over the next four years. On July 23, 2021, the Yukon signed the Canada-Yukon Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) Agreement, which allocated \$41.6 million over five years. The CWELCC agreement runs parallel to the Multilateral Framework Agreement without replacing it (Friendly et al., 2024).

In the Yukon, early learning and child care (ELCC) includes regulated child care centres, school-age programs, and family child care (family day homes), all overseen by the Department of Education. Full school-day kindergarten (K5) is available to all five-year-olds, with early

kindergarten (K4) offered in some rural schools. Kindergarten attendance is voluntary, and Francophone schools offer full-day kindergarten for both K4 and K5.

Licensed centre-based care includes full-day centres and before- and after-school programs. Part-day preschool programs are not required to be licensed. Centre-based child care is provided by a mix of for-profit, non-profit, and a small number of publicly operated centres, with 59% of full-day spaces being for-profit. Family day home providers are individually licensed (Friendly et al., 2024).

In April 2021, the Yukon launched the Universal Child Care (UCC) program, which reduced parent fees by \$700 per month for full-day spaces for children not yet in school and between \$300 and \$500 for kindergarten and school-age spaces. This initiative was integrated into the Yukon's Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) Agreement. Service providers set their own fees, while the territory limits parent fee increases. Fee subsidies are available for eligible low-income families at licensed for-profit or non-profit centres and day homes.

Structural Challenges for Women in SETT

While Canada's recent investments in early learning and child care, particularly through the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) initiative, represent a long-awaited step toward affordable, accessible, and inclusive care, the system continues to fall short for women in SETT, where women face unique barriers rooted not only in the cost and availability of child care, but in a care infrastructure that remains misaligned with the demands and realities of many SETT professions.

By and large, Canada's child care systems are designed for a 9-to-5 workforce, but even then, they remain misaligned due to the school-age gap, the period between when elementary school ends and when the typical workday concludes. While school age care (SAC) is a much-neglected policy and research area, for many families, child care for school-age children remains a necessity.

According to Fortner, Hardy, and Schmit (2021), school-age child care programs, for children between the ages of 4 and 12, provide a safe and supportive setting that fosters children's social, emotional, and academic growth. These programs often promote physical health, offer nutritious meals, and help reduce engagement in risky behaviours. Additionally, summer programs help prevent learning loss when school is not in session, ultimately broadening educational and developmental opportunities for children.

In 2022, across Canada parents utilized many types of before- or after-school child care arrangement for children aged 4 to 12, including programs located in a school, care by a relative, or siblings, daycare centres, home-based care, and programs located in community centres or libraries.

According to Statistics Canada's Survey on Before and After School Care in Canada (2022) over one-quarter (28%) of parents and guardians using before- or after-school care for children aged 4

to 12 reported difficulty finding it. Among those who faced challenges, the most common issue was a lack of available care in their community (68%), followed by the high cost of care (53%). Additionally, 13% struggled to find care that met their health-related concerns. These difficulties often had significant impacts on parents' employment: more than half (53%) had to change their work schedules, 43% worked fewer hours, 31% used their work leave, and 28% turned down work opportunities.

Beyond the school-age gap, women in SETT often work non-standard hours, including overnight shifts, unpredictable project schedules, field placements, or travel-intensive roles. Yet most regulated child care services in Canada operate within rigid daytime schedules. There remains a glaring lack of flexible, extended-hours, overnight, or on-demand child care options. This structural rigidity excludes women in industries like skilled trades or laboratory science, where work schedules do not conform to traditional office hours.

Women in trades or field-based engineering roles are more likely to live or work in rural, remote, or industrial areas, precisely the regions most affected by child care deserts. Despite ambitious funding goals, nearly half of children in Canada under school age still live in communities where regulated spaces are scarce (Friendly, 2023). This shortage hits SETT workers especially hard, as it not only limits their ability to work full-time but may also push them to leave their fields entirely due to lack of feasible care solutions near worksites or in smaller towns.

According to analysis done by Friendly and Macdonald (2023) child care deserts, defined as areas where there are more than three children for every licensed space, are widespread across Canada, affecting 48% of younger children. Infant care is particularly scarce, with most Canadian cities falling below the EU's 33% benchmark. In many cities, including Saskatoon and several in Ontario and Newfoundland, there are fewer than one space for every 10 infants, underscoring a significant access gap for the youngest children.

These so-called deserts are especially common in rural areas and smaller towns, where child care is harder to access due to low population density, long distances, and non-standard work hours. For women in SETT, these child care shortages create significant barriers to entry and retention.

Policy Recommendations to Improve Child Care for Women in SETT

Policy Recommendation	Policy Action	Rationale	Source(s)
Expand Non-Standard Hour Child Care	Fund and license child care centres offering early, late, and weekend hours.	SETT jobs often require shift work or early hours, making typical 9–5 child care inaccessible.	Friendly & Macdonald (2023); Engineers Canada (2022)
Prioritize Rural and Industrial Zones	Target funding and expansion of child	Women in SETT in smaller communities face	Friendly & Macdonald (2023); OECD (2020)

	care in rural and industrial areas.	disproportionate access barriers due to geographic child care deserts.	
Provide On-Site or Nearby Workplace Care	Offer tax credits or grants to employers creating child care near SETT worksites.	Proximity to care improves reliability and reduces commute burdens, especially in trades and technical fields.	Catalyst (2020); Government of Canada (2021)
Integrate Child Care into Apprenticeships	Bundle subsidized child care with SETT training and apprenticeship programs.	Supports retention of women during skill development stages where income is low, and schedules are demanding.	Government of Canada WAGE; Canadian Apprenticeship Forum (2021)

Critical Illness and Elder care

With the percentage of Canadians aged 65 and older is projected to increase from 18.5% in 2021 to 25.9% in 2068, and the population aged 85 and older predicted to more than triple from 871000 to 2.3million people within this period (Lee et al., 2024) an increasingly significant public health issue in Canada, (and elsewhere) pertains to the provision of care for the elderly.

While each person experiences ageing differently, older age is often accompanied by a decline in physical and cognitive abilities, increased functional limitations, and a higher risk of chronic conditions (Lee et al., 2024), which frequently necessitates some form of care.

In Canada, as in much of the world, the vast majority of care needs, including elder care needs, are met by individuals providing informal and unpaid support. Women continue to shoulder the bulk of this caregiving work, accounting for the majority of informal caregivers (Koshmaganbetova et al., 2024).

While this unpaid caregiving remains the foundation of elder care in Canada, there are formal programs and benefits available in Canada to support those providing care.

Across Canada the EI Caregiving Benefits provide temporary income support to individuals who must take time off work to care for a loved one. Caregivers can access up to 15 weeks of benefits through the Family Caregiver Benefit for Adults when caring for a critically ill or injured adult, and up to 26 weeks through the Compassionate Care Benefits when providing end-of-life care to someone of any age. To qualify, applicants must have accumulated at least 600 insured hours of work in the past 52 weeks and provide a medical certificate confirming the care recipient’s condition.

Across Canada, provinces offer unpaid, job-protected compassionate care leave that allows employees to take time off to care for a seriously or terminally ill family member. In most provinces — including Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Saskatchewan, and Yukon — employees can take up to 27 to 28 weeks of leave within a 52-week period. In Quebec, employees may take up to 16 weeks, extendable to 27 weeks if the illness is life-threatening. Eligibility typically requires employment with the same employer for a minimum period (commonly 90 days) and a medical certificate confirming the family member's condition. The definition of "family" is broad in most jurisdictions and often includes individuals considered "like family," not just immediate relatives. The leave can usually be taken in weekly installments, providing flexibility based on caregiving needs.

Some provinces offer additional caregiver support. For example, Ontario provides Family Caregiver Leave, offering up to eight weeks per year per specified family member, distinct from Family Medical Leave, which addresses end-of-life care with a significant risk of death within 26 weeks. Nova Scotia stands out as the only province offering direct financial assistance to caregivers through its Caregiver Benefit Program. Generally, during compassionate care leave, employers are required to reinstate employees to the same or a comparable job upon return, and employees remain protected from termination due to their leave. While the leaves themselves are unpaid, eligible employees may also access federal Employment Insurance (EI) Compassionate Care Benefits to receive some income support during their time off.

Caregiver Benefits for Critically Ill Children

A critical illness in a child is a life-altering experience—not only for the child, but also for their parents, caregivers, and extended family. To help alleviate the financial strain during such a challenging time, Canada's Employment Insurance (EI) program provides up to 35 weeks of financial assistance to eligible caregivers who take time off work to care for a critically ill or injured child under the age of 18. Eligible caregivers may be family members or individuals considered "like family" and the child's condition must represent a significant and sudden change to their baseline health and require ongoing care.

In addition, all provinces and territories in Canada provide job-protected, un-paid leave for employees who need to care for a critically ill or injured child under the age of 18. In every jurisdiction, this leave can last up to 37 weeks in a 52-week period to provide, however the required length of service to qualify varies: most regions require 30 to 90 days of employment with the same employer, while some, like Ontario, Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, and Yukon, require six months. In several provinces, such as British Columbia, Prince Edward Island, and Saskatchewan, no specific service duration is needed, potentially improving accessibility for newer employees. A medical certificate confirming the child's condition is generally required. Though this leave is unpaid, it may be combined with EI Family Caregiver Benefits for Children, and Nova Scotia is the only jurisdiction that currently offers direct financial assistance to caregivers through a provincial program.

Structural Challenges for Women in SETT

In Canada, relying on informal caregiving, has become a critical strategy for sustaining the health care system, helping to bridge gaps in formal services and reduce pressure on institutional care (Khayatzadeh-Mahani, A., & Leslie, 2018). According to Health Canada, an informal caregiver is defined as "an individual who provides care and/or support to a family member, friend or neighbour who has a physical or mental disability, is chronically ill or is frail".

Researchers and advocacy groups alike have identified many gaps in Canada’s reliance on informal caregiving- gaps that are deeply misaligned with the realities faced by women in science, engineering, trades and technology.

As previously noted, these sectors are often characterized by non-standard work schedules, project-based contracts, and male-dominated cultures that often resist accommodations related to caregiving, particularly elder care, which continues to be framed as a private or personal matter (McGowan, 2009).

Women in SETT face multiple, intersecting structural challenges when attempting to access caregiving supports. Although federal EI caregiving benefits exist, eligibility requires a minimum of 600 insured hours in the previous 52 weeks. This threshold excludes many tradeswomen and technical workers whose employment is precarious, seasonal, shift-based, or marked by frequent contract changes. The design of these benefits assumes linear, full-time employment, which is not reflective of how many SETT professionals’ work.

Even when women are eligible, the fact that most provincial caregiving leaves are unpaid creates a financial penalty that disproportionately affects early-career and lower-income workers. Without employer top-ups or consistent wage replacement, women in SETT must often choose between maintaining income stability and providing critical care—especially in fields where time away from work can stall skill development or lead to missed licensing hours and project opportunities. While Nova Scotia’s Caregiver Benefit Program represents a promising step toward direct financial assistance, its absence across most provinces only deepens inequities

Adding to this is the near-total lack of formal return-to-work or re-skilling programs for women who take time off to provide care. In fast-evolving sectors like engineering, technology, and the trades, a months-long absence can result in skill gaps or lost credentials. Yet Canada’s caregiver leave framework treats return as seamless, overlooking the reintegration challenges that women face in male-dominated professions where long absences may raise doubts about their commitment or competence.

Policy Recommendations to Caregiver Benefits for Women in SETT

Policy Recommendation	Policy Action	Rationale	Source(s)
Reform EI Eligibility Criteria for Caregivers	Amend the EI Caregiving Benefits program to accommodate non-standard, contract-	Current requirements (600 insured hours) exclude many SETT women	Lee et al. (2024); McGowan (2009)

	based, and seasonal employment patterns common in SETT sectors.	workers who do not have continuous full-time employment.	
Introduce Paid Caregiving Leave at the Provincial Level	Establish wage replacement or employer top-ups for compassionate and family caregiver leave across all provinces.	Unpaid leave disproportionately affects early-career and low-income women, forcing them to choose between income and caregiving.	Koshmaganbetova et al. (2024); McGowan (2009)
Implement National Return-to-Work Programs for Caregivers	Develop sector-specific re-entry, re-skilling, and credential renewal programs for caregivers returning to SETT careers.	Women in fast-paced SETT fields risk de-skilling or loss of credentials due to extended caregiving absences.	Khayatzadeh-Mahani & Leslie (2018); Engineers Canada (2022)
Expand Provincial Financial Assistance Programs	Replicate and scale Nova Scotia’s Caregiver Benefit Program across other provinces and territories.	Direct financial support reduces caregiving strain and promotes equity for families without access to formal care services.	Lee et al. (2024); Nova Scotia Government
Standardize Access to Caregiver Leave	Harmonize eligibility rules across provinces to reduce variability in minimum service duration and application processes.	Inconsistent rules create confusion and limit access for mobile or recently employed SETT professionals.	Government of Canada (2023); Provincial Labour Codes

Conclusion

This research underscores the urgent need to rethink and redesign Canada’s care-related structures through a gender- and sector-conscious lens. While recent policy advancements, including expanded parental leave, the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care initiative, and caregiver benefits, represent important steps forward, they continue to fall short for women working in science, engineering, trades, and technology (SETT). Women in SETT often face unique and compounding barriers shaped by non-standard employment, rigid and frequently

male-dominated workplace cultures, and systemic undervaluation of care responsibilities. Across maternity leave, child care, and caregiving for critical illness or elder care, existing policies frequently exclude the very workers most in need of support.

For Canada to truly support women's full participation in the workforce, especially in high-demand and future-focused sectors, (particularly as we navigate a significant shortage of skilled trades workers, with projections indicating that 700,000 tradespeople will retire by 2028) we must recognize care as an infrastructure issue, not a personal one (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2022).

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Appendix A: Maternity, Parental, and Adoptive Leave Provisions by Province and Territory in Canada

Province/Territory	Length of Continuous Employment Required	Earliest Start Before Due Date	Maternity/Pregnancy/Adoptive Leave Length	Parental/Child Care Leave Length
Alberta	90 days	13 weeks	16 weeks	62 weeks
British Columbia	N/A	13 weeks	17 weeks	61/62 weeks
Manitoba	7 months	17 weeks	17 weeks	63 weeks
New Brunswick	N/A	13 weeks	17 weeks	62 weeks (max 78)
Newfoundland and Labrador	20 weeks	17 weeks	17 weeks	61 weeks
Northwest Territories	12 months	17 weeks	17 weeks	61 weeks
Nova Scotia	N/A	16 weeks	16 weeks	61/77 weeks
Nunavut	12 months	17 weeks	17 weeks	37 weeks (max 52)
Ontario	13 weeks	13 weeks	17 weeks	61/63 weeks
Prince Edward Island	20 weeks	13 weeks	17 weeks	62 weeks (max 78)
Quebec	N/A	16 weeks (maternity)	18 weeks (maternity); 5 weeks (paternity)	65 weeks
Saskatchewan	13 weeks	13 weeks	19 weeks	59/71 weeks
Yukon	12 months	N/A	17 weeks	63 weeks

Appendix B: Child Care Policy Implementation and Workforce Shortages by Province and Territory

Province/Territory	\$10/day Target Achieved	Before/After School Care Issues	Overnight Care Available	Flexible/Extended Hours	Workforce Shortages	Public/Non-Profit Priority	% of Children in Child Care Deserts	% of Children in Before/After School Care	Workforce Shortage Response ³
Alberta	By 2026	Unresolved	No	Limited	Yes	Mixed (some private)	61%	34%	Wage top-ups, ECE training expansion, free Level 1 program
British Columbia	In progress	Unresolved	No	Limited	Yes	Mixed (priority on non-profit)	64%	41%	ECE wage enhancement (+\$6/hr), training supports, benefit funding
Manitoba	Achieved	Unresolved	No	Limited	Yes	Non-profit	76%	41%	Wage grid in place, capped parent fees tied to funding, ECE workforce support
New Brunswick	In progress	Unresolved	No	Limited	Yes	Mixed	29%	51%	Designated centers with wage supports; training initiatives in place
Newfoundland and Labrador	Achieved	Unresolved	No	Limited	Yes	Mixed	79%	47%	Wage grid for center staff,

³ The "Workforce Shortages" column refers to whether there is a documented or reported shortage of early childhood educators (ECEs) and other child care staff in each province or territory. This is a key issue in the implementation of child care policies like the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) program.

									ELCC Supplement for family care
Nova Scotia	In progress	Unresolved	No	Limited	Yes	Mixed	47%	47%	Increased funding for ECE wages and professional development
Ontario	By 2026	Unresolved	No	Limited	Yes	Mixed	53%	35%	RECE wage increase (to \$23.86/hr), annual increases planned
Prince Edward Island	Achieved	Unresolved	No	Limited	Yes	Mixed	4%	43%	Wage grid for Early Years Centres, wage increases tied to designation
Quebec	Pre-existing system	Unresolved	No	Limited	Yes	Non-profit prioritized	11%	51%	Wage grid and unionization in subsidized centers; ongoing conversion of private spaces
Saskatchewan	Achieved	Unresolved	No	Limited	Yes	Primarily non-profit	92%	37%	ECE Wage Enhancement Grant (\$1.50–\$2.50/hr increase)
Northwest Territories	Achieved	Unresolved	No	Limited	Yes	Non-profit only	80-90%	Unknown	ECE Retention Incentive replacing Staff Grant
Nunavut	Achieved	Unresolved	No	Limited	Yes	Non-profit only	90-100%	Unknown	Wage scale program includes Northern

									Allowance by community
Yukon	Achieved	Unresolved	No	Limited	Yes	Mixed	60-70%	Unknown	Universal Child Care with support for providers; some wage support

Appendix C: Compassionate, Critical Illness, and Caregiver Leave Provisions by Province and Territory

Province/Territory	Compassionate Care Leave ⁴ - Duration	Compassionate Care Leave - Service Requirement	Critical Illness Leave ⁵ (Adult) - Duration	Critical Illness Leave - Service Requirement	Caregiver Benefit Program Available	Critically Ill Child Leave - Duration	Service Requirement
Alberta	27 weeks	90 days	16 weeks	90 days	No	36 weeks	90 days
British Columbia	27 weeks	None specified	16 weeks	Not specified	No	37 weeks	Day 1
Manitoba	28 weeks	90 days	17 weeks	90 days	No	37 weeks	30 days
New Brunswick	28 weeks	None specified	16 weeks	Not specified	No	37 weeks	None specified
Newfoundland and Labrador	28 weeks	30 days	17 weeks	30 days	No	37 weeks	30 days
Nova Scotia	28 weeks	3 months	16 weeks	3 months	Yes (Nova Scotia Caregiver Benefit Program)	37 weeks	3 months
Ontario	28 weeks	None specified	17 weeks	6 months	No	37 weeks	6 months
Prince Edward Island	28 weeks	None specified	No	No	No	37 weeks	3 months
Quebec	27 weeks	3 months	16-weeks	3 months	No	37 weeks	3 months
Saskatchewan	28 weeks	13 weeks	17 weeks	13 weeks	No	37 weeks	13 weeks
Nunavut	17 weeks	6 months	17 weeks	6 months	No	37 weeks	6 months
North West Territories	27 weeks	None specified	17 weeks	6 months	No	37 weeks	6 months
Yukon	28 weeks	None specified	17 weeks	6 months	No	37 weeks	6 months

⁴ Compassionate Care Leave: To care for a family member who has a serious medical condition with a significant risk of death within 26 weeks.

⁵ Critical Illness Leave: To support a critically ill adult family member (not necessarily at end of life), often when their baseline state of health has significantly changed due to illness or injury.

