Towards Universal Childcare: Comparing Provincial Commitments Under the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreements

by

Sara Fehr

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Department of Sociology

University of Manitoba

Winnipeg, Manitoba

ABSTRACT

Is Canada on the cusp of a third-order policy change toward a fully public, Canada-wide childcare system? Introduced in the 2021 federal budget, the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) agreement commits $27 billion over five years to expand access to affordable, high-quality childcare, with an explicit preference for not-for-profit and public delivery. Despite this commitment, childcare advocates argue that expansion has been slow and uneven, and that commercial childcare continues to grow in several provinces. This study examines Manitoba and Alberta as comparative case studies to assess provincial adherence to not-for-profit and public childcare delivery and to explain the continued expansion of for-profit provision under CWELCC. Guided by feminist political economy and path dependency, this historically informed analysis draws on administrative data, provincial legislation, and social movement documents. The findings show that while some not-for-profit expansion has occurred since 2021, both provinces demonstrate limited commitment to building a predominantly public system and continue to accommodate commercial providers. The study concludes that without a third-order policy shift, Canada's childcare system risks entrenching a marketized patchwork of uneven quality rather than achieving a universal, public system.

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CHILDCARE AS A PUBLIC RIGHT: COMMERCIALIZATION, FEDERALISM, AND THE NEED FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

A Rights-Based Approach and the Need for Third-Order Change

Childcare is not simply a service that enables caregivers—especially women—to work; it is a fundamental right of children and a cornerstone of an equitable society. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which Canada ratified in 1991, affirms that all children have the right to development, education, and protection (United Nations 1989). Article 18 of the UNCRC explicitly calls on states to ensure that children of working parents have access to appropriate care services. From a rights-based perspective, childcare must be understood not as a commodity to be purchased on the market, but as an essential piece of public infrastructure, akin to public education or health care.

In Canada, however, childcare has historically been shaped by neoliberal policies that emphasize privatization, competition, and market-driven parental choice. This neoliberal framing treats families as individual consumers rather than members of a collective society, promoting a fragmented system in which profit-making is not only permitted but publicly subsidized. As Friendly and Prentice (2009) argue, this market logic undermines the collective responsibility needed to support children, families, and women. The privatization of care commodifies childhood itself, turning a public good into a site of private accumulation. Such a system fails to recognize that it takes a village, not a market, to nurture children and communities.

This thesis argues that Canada's childcare system requires third-order change (Hall 1993), a deep, structural transformation that fundamentally shifts societal paradigms. Third-order change goes beyond incremental policy reforms (first order) or procedural adjustments (second order); it challenges the very assumptions underpinning the system. For childcare, this means

rejecting the idea of care as a market service and instead embedding it in a framework of public responsibility and universal rights. Universal, publicly owned and operated childcare would represent a radical departure from neoliberal governance, realigning policy with the ethical imperative that children's care should never be commodified or profit driven (Friendly 2019).

Legislation is not presented here as a panacea against retrenchment. As Hall (1993) demonstrates, third-order policy change does not hinge on the legal durability of particular statutes, but on the institutionalization of a new policy paradigm—one that redefines the goals, instruments, and normative foundations of governance. In Hall's (1993) account of the shift from Keynesianism to monetarism in the United Kingdom, paradigm change occurred not simply through new laws but through a broader reorientation of economic reasoning and policy instruments that restructured the terms of debate. Legislation, in this context, functions as a vehicle for embedding new principles and signalling a shift in governing ideas. It raises the political and administrative costs of reversal by codifying goals, establishing reporting and accountability mechanisms, and reshaping the available policy toolkit. However, statutes remain amendable. The significance of legislation for this thesis therefore lies not in its immutability, but in its capacity to institutionalize a new paradigm of childcare as public infrastructure rather than private commodity.

At present, the childcare landscape in Canada reflects a dangerous compromise. The federal government's Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) agreement, introduced in 2021, represents a historic investment in affordability and access. Yet, while the agreement emphasizes not-for-profit delivery, implementation has been uneven across provinces. In some jurisdictions, commercial interests have captured this public funding, entrenching for-

profit care. These developments highlight the urgent need for a critical, feminist, and rights-based analysis of childcare policy.

Federalism in this thesis is understood not as a fixed constitutional arrangement but as a dynamic configuration of jurisdictional authority, fiscal capacity, and intergovernmental negotiation. In the Canadian context, provinces hold primary jurisdiction over education and social services, including childcare, yet the federal government exercises influence through what scholars describe as the federal "spending power" (Banting 2020; Telford, Graefe, and Banting 2008). "Fiscal federalism" refers to the distribution of revenue-raising and expenditure responsibilities across orders of government, and the mechanisms—particularly conditional transfers—through which one order of government can shape policy outcomes in another. Although childcare falls within provincial jurisdiction, the CWELCC agreements illustrate how targeted federal transfers can indirectly structure provincial policy choices by attaching conditions related to affordability, workforce development, and expansion priorities.

At the same time, Canadian federalism is characterized by significant regional variation. Scholars have long emphasized the "asymmetrical" or "uneven" nature of Canadian federalism, whereby provinces pursue divergent policy trajectories reflecting distinct political cultures, institutional legacies, and partisan alignments (Banting 2020; Mahon 2009b). Rather than producing uniform national standards, federal social programs often generate differentiated outcomes across provinces, even when anchored in shared funding frameworks. This unevenness is not merely administrative but ideological: provincial governments interpret federal initiatives through existing policy paradigms and economic models. Understanding CWELCC therefore requires situating it within a system of fiscal federalism that enables federal steering yet operates within a territorially uneven landscape shaped by provincial autonomy and path dependency.

By centering this analysis on the contrasting cases of Manitoba and Alberta, this thesis demonstrates the consequences of divergent policy pathways. Manitoba has historically relied on not-for-profit childcare delivery, shaped by strong advocacy organizations and grassroots mobilization (White and Prentice 2016). Alberta, in contrast, has embraced commercialization, with approximately 66 percent of licensed childcare spaces operating under a for-profit model (Beach 2021). These trajectories are not accidental; they reflect the path-dependent effects of early policy decisions, as well as the differential power of advocacy and lobbying in shaping childcare systems over time (Pierson 2000). Understanding these dynamics is critical for assessing the prospects of building a universal, publicly oriented childcare system in Canada.

Ultimately, this research contends that childcare should be decommodified through strong public planning and, ideally, public ownership and operation. Decommodification describes the process through which essential social goods are insulated from market allocation and instead secured as collective, publicly funded entitlements grounded in social rights rather than the ability to pay (Esping-Andersen 1990). The ethical critique of for-profit care rests not only on moral intuition but on structural dynamics: when care is organized as a site of private accumulation, the incentives governing its provision are oriented toward surplus generation rather than universal access, workforce equity, or developmental quality. As Collins and Ferracioli (2023) argue, certain caring relationships—particularly those involving children—require normative commitments that sit uneasily alongside profit imperatives.

The claim that childcare is a right does not logically require constitutional entrenchment or a single administrative form. However, rights claims imply universality, durability, and public accountability. Public ownership and operation best approximate these conditions because they align financing, governance, and service delivery under collective authority rather than market

discipline. While not-for-profit models reduce profit extraction, they remain dependent on fragmented governance structures and constrained revenue streams. A publicly owned system, by contrast, embeds care within the state's institutional responsibility, strengthening the link between social rights and public obligation. The argument advanced here is therefore not that legislation or public delivery makes retrenchment impossible, but that it most closely aligns institutional design with the normative commitments of equality and justice that a rights-based approach demands.

Empirically, the ethical concern is grounded in observable structural incentives. In childcare, labour constitutes the largest share of operating costs; therefore, in profit-oriented centres, wages and staffing levels become the primary levers for maintaining margins. Multiple Canadian studies have found that for-profit centres, on average, pay lower wages, experience higher staff turnover, and are less likely to exceed minimum regulatory standards compared to non-profit providers (Doherty et al. 2000; Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005; Beach et al. 2023). These differences matter for children's developmental outcomes: continuity of care, educator qualifications, and staff stability are strongly associated with program quality. In addition, commercial providers tend to expand in higher-income or high-demand markets where fee revenue is more secure, contributing to uneven geographic distribution and persistent "childcare deserts" in rural or lower-income communities (Friendly 2019). The issue, then, is not simply that profit is earned, but that the structural logic of profit maximization introduces incentives that can depress quality and reproduce inequality, particularly when public regulation and funding are insufficient to counterbalance these pressures.

With this structure in place, this thesis proceeds as follows. Chapter Two situates Canada's childcare system within the existing literature on commercialization, federalism, and

social reproduction, tracing how market logics have historically shaped early learning and childcare policy. Chapter Three outlines the theoretical and methodological framework, drawing on feminist political economy, intersectionality, and theories of policy change to guide the comparative analysis. Chapters Four and Five present the Manitoba and Alberta case studies, examining how each province has interpreted and implemented CWELCC commitments in light of their distinct political cultures, institutional legacies, and relationships to market provision. The final chapter synthesizes these findings to assess the broader implications of CWELCC for the future of childcare governance in Canada.

While the CWELCC agreements are frequently framed as technical instruments to improve affordability and workforce conditions, they also function as sites of political contestation, where competing paradigms of care—as social infrastructure or as subsidized services subject to market pressures—remain unresolved. These tensions are especially visible in provincial debates over non-profit expansion, for-profit eligibility, wage regulation, and public accountability.

Importantly, because the first set of CWELCC agreements are now approaching their five-year deadline, a growing body of evaluative evidence has emerged. In his recent "Last Mile: Provincial Child Care Expansion at the Five-Year Deadline," David Macdonald (2026) documents that although licensed spaces have increased since 2022, the overall pace and pattern of expansion fall short of federal goals, both in terms of total spaces and the explicit aim of building predominantly non-profit, low-fee provision. Across Canada, provinces collectively agreed to create over 284,000 spaces by March 2026 but, with six months still to go, had produced only about 194,000, most of them in for-profit centres that operate counter to the commitments to non-profit/public growth. As a result, more than half of new spaces are in for-

profit settings, and several large provinces, including Alberta and Manitoba, are unlikely to meet their original targets. While overall accessibility has improved, many regions remain childcare deserts, with coverage far below the federal target of 5.9 licensed spaces per ten children. This uneven progress underscores the "gap between politics and reality" (Macdonald 2026) between ambitious federal promises and provincial capacity and willingness to build the kind of system originally envisioned.

This thesis engages these developments by asking not simply whether CWELCC has worked, but what kind of system it is actively producing. By examining Manitoba and Alberta as contrasting provincial cases, the analysis explores whether CWELCC is consolidating a pathway toward decommodified, publicly oriented childcare, or whether it risks entrenching a dual system in which public funding continues to subsidize market-oriented provision. These questions provide the foundation for the theoretical and empirical analysis that follows. This analysis underscores the urgency of third-order change: without a radical shift toward public ownership, Canada risks entrenching a system that perpetuates inequity and commodifies children's care for generations to come.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CHILDCARE IN CANADA: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Childcare in Canada has long reflected a tension between market logic and social responsibility. Feminist scholars argue that the country's approach to early learning and childcare has been shaped by the gendered organization of care, federalism's fragmented design, and an enduring ambivalence about whether care constitutes a public right or a private responsibility (Mahon 2009c). Until recently, Canada was widely characterized as a "patchwork" system—decentralized, uneven, and heavily reliant on market delivery (Friendly 2019; Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005). The introduction of the CWELCC agreement in 2021 marked a

turning point: a federal attempt to embed childcare as social infrastructure. Yet, the terrain remains contested, with public and market logics coexisting uneasily (Macdonald 2025).

Historically, childcare policy did not develop as a coherent social right but through episodic interventions tied to labour-market and welfare objectives. Wartime nurseries under the Dominion–Provincial Wartime Agreement (1942–46) were explicitly framed as temporary supports to mobilize women's labour during the Second World War; most closed when federal funding was withdrawn, reinforcing the perception of childcare as an exceptional rather than permanent public responsibility (Friendly and Prentice 2009).

Prior to the neoliberal turn of the 1990s, childcare provision in Canada evolved through several distinct phases. Early forms of organized childcare in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were largely charitable or missionary in origin, established in urban centres to support poor and immigrant families. These programs were typically operated by religious organizations and philanthropic societies, reflecting a moral framing of childcare as custodial relief rather than educational infrastructure. During the postwar period, childcare gradually entered provincial policy frameworks, most notably through federal–provincial cost-sharing arrangements under the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) in 1966. Although CAP framed childcare as a welfare service for "families in need," it required that publicly funded services be delivered by public or not-for-profit providers. In this sense, early state involvement reinforced a non-commercial delivery model, even while limiting access through means-testing and residual eligibility criteria (Friendly and Prentice 2009; Mahon 2009).

The shift toward market-oriented childcare emerged more clearly in the 1990s, as provinces responded to fiscal restraint, CAP's replacement with the Canada Health and Social Transfer, and broader neoliberal restructuring. Under these conditions, direct operational funding

stagnated or declined in several jurisdictions, and fee subsidies increasingly replaced supply-side grants. The policy framing also shifted: childcare was repositioned less as a social service for vulnerable families and more as a labour-market support enabling parental employment and "choice." This transition marked a departure from earlier public/not-for-profit assumptions and laid the groundwork for the commercialization patterns that later characterized provinces such as Alberta (Friendly et al. 2021; Mahon 2009).

At the same time, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed significant advocacy for a universal public system. The 1970 Royal Commission on the Status of Women recommended the development of a national daycare program as a condition of women's equality (Royal Commission on the Status of Women 1970). Feminist movements framed childcare as essential to social citizenship and labour-force participation, pressing for a federally coordinated system (Friendly and Prentice 2009; Mahon 2009c). While these proposals shaped public discourse and provincial experimentation—particularly through community-based non-profit models—they were never fully institutionalized at the federal level, leaving childcare development uneven and decentralized (Friendly 2019).

The neoliberal restructuring of the 1980s and 1990s consolidated this residual model into an explicitly market-oriented framework. Fiscal restraint, retrenchment of federal transfers, and an emphasis on efficiency and parental choice reframed childcare as a consumer service rather than a collective entitlement (Mahon 2009c). Policy instruments increasingly favoured parent fee subsidies over operational funding, encouraging private entrepreneurship and competition among providers. This period entrenched what feminist scholars describe as the commodification of care—a process that subjects socially necessary reproductive labour to market imperatives and marginalizes its social and developmental value (Bakker 2007).

Within this landscape, commercialization, privatization, and marketization operate as overlapping but distinct processes. Privatization refers to the transfer of service delivery or ownership from public to private actors. Marketization denotes the creation or expansion of quasi-market mechanisms, competition, parental choice, and user fees, in sectors traditionally governed by public planning. Commercialization, the most precise term for the Canadian childcare context, captures the transformation of care into a site of profit accumulation and capital investment (Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005). These processes are not neutral: they shape access, affordability, and quality, and they reconfigure childcare as a commodity rather than a social right (Bakker 2007).

The literature consistently finds that ownership structure is a determinant of quality and equity. Cleveland and Krashinsky's (2005) comparative study of non-profit and commercial centres in Canada concluded that non-profit settings consistently score higher on staff qualifications, stability, and program quality. Similarly, Doherty, Lero, Goelman, LaGrange and Tougas (2000) found that educators in for-profit centres earned 20–25 percent less than those in non-profits, faced higher turnover, and reported lower morale. These dynamics directly affect children's experiences of continuity and relational care, a central tenet of early childhood pedagogy. For-profit ownership tends to prioritize cost minimization, particularly labour costs, thereby undermining the very dimensions that constitute high-quality care (Cleveland 2015).

The economic and social costs of such commercialization are well documented. In 2023, the median fee for an infant childcare space in Canada was approximately $1,300 per month, with for-profit centres often charging more than their non-profit counterparts (Statistics Canada 2023). Families in major urban centres such as Toronto, Vancouver, and Calgary have faced what economists describe as structural market failure in childcare: supply responds to

profitability rather than population need, generating persistent shortages in low-income, rural, and northern communities (Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005; Macdonald and Friendly 2022). Prior to CWELCC, approximately 75 percent of children under five did not have access to a licensed space (Beach, Friendly, Nguyen, Borges Nogueira, Taylor, Mohamed, Rothman and Forer 2023).

This market failure is not merely a product of regulatory constraint but of the underlying economics of childcare provision. Childcare is highly labour-intensive, with wages constituting the majority of operating costs, and productivity gains are limited by mandated staff-to-child ratios (Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005). At the same time, families' ability to pay is constrained; full cost-recovery pricing for high-quality care would exceed what most households can afford. These structural features produce thin margins and high financial risk for providers, particularly in lower-income or sparsely populated areas where demand is less predictable. As a result, market providers tend to cluster in higher-income urban markets, where enrolment is stable and fees can sustain operations, leaving childcare "deserts" elsewhere (Macdonald and Friendly 2022). The failure, therefore, is not only one of quality or equity, but of availability: profit-driven expansion does not reliably align with social need.

From a feminist political economy perspective, these inequities stem from the state's historical failure to value care as essential infrastructure. Feminist political economy situates childcare within the social organization of reproduction, the unpaid and underpaid labour that sustains the paid economy (Bakker 2007). By analyzing policy through the lens of social reproduction, feminist political economist scholars reveal how childcare policy choices reflect gendered divisions of labour and broader capitalist imperatives. In Canada, policy has oscillated between two paradigms: the market paradigm, which treats childcare as a private service

facilitating parental employment, and the public-good paradigm, which recognizes it as collective infrastructure that enables both gender equality and child development (Friendly 2019; Mahon 2009b). CWELCC represents an attempt to move from the former to the latter, though, as this chapter argues, that transformation remains incomplete and contested.

International human rights architecture provides critical normative grounding for understanding childcare as both a gender and a child rights issue. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (United Nations 1979) obligates signatories, including Canada, to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in employment, including through the provision of public childcare services. Similarly, the UNCRC (United Nations 1989) affirms children's right to education, development, and protection. These conventions, read together, establish a dual rights framework: childcare is not merely instrumental to labour market participation, but intrinsic to the rights of both caregivers and children.

Feminist policy scholars argue that realizing these rights requires transforming care from a market commodity into a universal entitlement (Prentice 2005). However, Canada has historically treated childcare as an individual responsibility, with access mediated by ability to pay. The result is a system that violates the spirit, if not the letter, of its international commitments. Under CWELCC, federal rhetoric increasingly aligns with rights-based principles, promising "accessible, affordable, high-quality, and inclusive" care (Government of Canada 2021d). Yet the agreements stop short of explicitly codifying childcare as a legal right, leaving it vulnerable to future political and fiscal shifts.

The gap between rights discourse and policy practice illustrates the limits of incremental reform within a market framework. True transformation would require what Hall (1993) terms a

"third-order change," a shift not merely in instruments or goals, but in the underlying policy paradigm itself. While CWELCC gestures toward such a shift by invoking affordability, inclusion, and public responsibility, the persistence of for-profit expansion, weak and uneven wage policies, and decentralized governance suggests that the market paradigm has not been displaced but merely modified, leaving the overall direction of reform uncertain.

The history of childcare policy in Canada is marked by uneven development across provinces, shaped by the structure of federalism and divergent political ideologies. The Canadian Constitution assigns responsibility for education and social services to provinces, leaving the federal government with a limited role in direct delivery but significant fiscal leverage through transfer payments. This arrangement produced a system of fragmented federalism (Mahon 2009c), where provinces could interpret childcare as welfare, education, or private service, resulting in profound regional differences.

Manitoba and Alberta exemplify two ends of this policy continuum. Manitoba's childcare system evolved through a strong community-based, non-profit model grounded in social democratic traditions. In contrast, Alberta's system embraced market logic, privileging private delivery and parental choice. These divergent trajectories demonstrate how historical path dependencies and policy feedback loops, concepts drawn from institutional theory, have entrenched different governance and ownership structures that now shape each province's response to CWELCC.

In Manitoba, the origins of a community-oriented childcare model trace back to the 1970s, when feminist and anti-poverty activists linked childcare to gender equality and social justice. The provincial government established one of the earliest operating grant systems in Canada, ensuring predictable funding to non-profit centres (Friendly and Prentice 2009). This

policy decision was foundational: by subsidizing only non-profit operations rather than parents directly, Manitoba embedded collective accountability and discouraged profit extraction.

These institutional features reflect what policy scholars describe as path dependency, once a policy direction is established, vested interests, organizational routines, and public expectations reinforce its continuation (Pierson 2000). In Manitoba's case, the presence of a strong non-profit network and advocacy community (notably through the Child Care Coalition of Manitoba, the local affiliates of Child Care Now) has continually defended public funding principles and resisted privatization. The province entered CWELCC from a position of relative alignment: its governance structures and values already reflected the program's emphasis on public and non-profit expansion.

By contrast, Alberta's childcare policy trajectory reflects a persistent orientation toward markets and parental choice. The province's approach was heavily shaped by neoliberal restructuring during the 1990s, when fiscal austerity under Premier Ralph Klein curtailed public spending and encouraged private-sector solutions across social programs (Mahon 2009c). Childcare became framed as a consumer good, with parents cast as rational choosers in a market of providers. In this model, government's role was limited to regulating safety standards and offering fee subsidies to families rather than directly funding providers (Prentice 2009).

The results were stark. According to the Childcare Resource and Research Unit (Friendly, Beach and Turiano 2003), by 2001, for-profit providers sponsored 22,931 full-time regulated centre-based childcare spaces (approximately 56 percent), compared to 18,080 spaces operated by non-profit providers (44 percent). Compared to Manitoba, where non-profit providers sponsored 17,540 regulated centre-based childcare spaces (approximately 92 percent), while for-profit providers accounted for 1,561 spaces (about 8 percent). This has direct implications for

quality and equity. Research shows that Alberta's heavy reliance on commercial providers correlates with lower average wages, higher staff turnover, and weaker access in rural and lower-income communities (Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005).

The policy divergence between Manitoba and Alberta also illuminates not an absence of federal capacity, but a historical reluctance to exercise strong conditional authority in childcare. While social services fall under provincial jurisdiction, the federal government possesses significant spending power and has, in other domains such as healthcare, imposed binding national standards through conditional transfers. Prior to 2021, however, federal childcare initiatives—including the 1999 Early Childhood Development Agreement and the 2005 Foundations Program (later cancelled)—provided time-limited funding with limited enforceable conditions (Friendly and Prentice 2009). Transfers emphasized collaboration and flexibility rather than legislated standards or sustained operational commitments.

This approach reflected both political caution within Canada's federal framework and, at times, ideological alignment with decentralization and market-based delivery. Rather than using its fiscal leverage to entrench a national public model, Ottawa deferred to provincial autonomy, allowing jurisdictions to define childcare as welfare support, labour-market policy, or private service according to local priorities. The resulting patchwork system left families subject to geographic inequities: access to affordable, high-quality care depended largely on provincial political will (Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005; Friendly 2019; Mahon 2009b).

This decentralization reflected deeper tensions in Canadian federalism. While flexibility is often celebrated as respecting provincial autonomy, it has historically enabled uneven realization of social rights. Childcare, like healthcare before it, illustrates how fiscal federalism can reproduce inequality when national standards are weak or absent. Feminist political

economists argue that this arrangement privatized not just childcare services but the very risks of care itself, displacing responsibility for social reproduction onto households, particularly women (Bakker 2007).

The CWELCC agreements attempt to rebalance this dynamic through conditional federal transfers, tying funding to commitments on affordability, workforce supports, data reporting, and the prioritization of non-profit and public expansion (Beach et al. 2023). In this respect, CWELCC is not unprecedented within Canadian federalism. Since the 1960s, federal social transfers—under the Canada Assistance Plan and later the Canada Health Act—have included enforceable conditions attached to cost-shared funding. The federal spending power has long permitted Ottawa to shape provincial policy indirectly through fiscal leverage (Telford et al. 2008).

What distinguishes CWELCC is not the existence of conditionality itself, but its reintroduction into a policy domain that historically lacked durable national standards. CWELCC thus represents a sector-specific shift: a move toward structured, goal-oriented conditionality in early learning and childcare, though without the legislative entrenchment that characterizes health transfers. Provinces retain policy autonomy, but access to substantial federal funding now depends on demonstrable alignment with shared objectives (Mahon 2009b; Telford et al. 2008).

Yet, as the literature cautions, the structure of CWELCC reflects enduring intergovernmental bargaining dynamics within Canadian federalism. Agreements vary in detail and ambition not simply because of divergent interpretations of federal intent, but because provinces negotiate the scope and implementation of conditions within a framework that balances shared objectives and provincial autonomy. As Telford, Graefe, and Banting (2008) demonstrate, conditional social transfers in Canada are shaped by ongoing negotiation rather

than unilateral federal imposition. Provinces therefore implement federal initiatives in ways that align with local political priorities while remaining within the boundaries necessary to secure funding. Where conditions are broadly framed—such as commitments to "prioritize" non-profit expansion—considerable discretion remains at the provincial level. The effectiveness of federal reform thus depends not only on stated objectives, but on the clarity of conditions and the institutional capacity to monitor compliance.

Alberta, for instance, has resisted caps on private expansion and pressed for greater flexibility in how funding applies to commercial centres (Government of Alberta 2023). Manitoba, by contrast, has largely embraced the non-profit expansion mandate but faces structural capacity challenges in scaling up trained educators and physical spaces (Beach et al. 2023). These interprovincial dynamics highlight how CWELCC's success depends on reconciling competing paradigms, market versus public, provincial autonomy versus federal coordination.

These tensions can be interpreted as evidence of second-versus third-order change (Hall 1993). CWELCC achieves first- and second-order change by introducing new instruments (fee caps, wage grids) and redefining policy goals (affordability and inclusion). But a third-order change, altering the core policy paradigm, remains incomplete. In provinces like Manitoba, the ideological foundation for a public system already exists; in Alberta, the market logic persists. As a result, Canada's childcare system stands less at a singular crossroads than at a point of differentiated consolidation. Rather than uniformly evolving into either a universal public system or a subsidized private market, it is more plausible that CWELCC will entrench divergent provincial trajectories. In provinces with established non-profit infrastructures and strong public governance traditions, federal funding may deepen decommodified, publicly oriented models. In

more market-oriented jurisdictions, however, CWELCC risks stabilizing a mixed system in which public subsidies coexist with significant commercial provision. The likely outcome, therefore, is not convergence but the persistence, and possible institutionalization, of a new patchwork: uneven degrees of decommodification shaped by provincial political economies and ownership structures.

Ownership in childcare is more than a technical matter of governance; it is a political and moral question about the purposes of care. Feminist political economists argue that ownership structure determines who benefits from public investment: children, educators, or shareholders (Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005). This advantage of non-profit care arises from the reinvestment of surpluses into wages and programming, as opposed to profit extraction and cost minimisation that typify for-profit operations (Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005; Friendly 2019).

The structural logic of commercialization helps explain why these patterns persist. As Cleveland and Krashinsky (2009) argue, childcare operates in what they term "thin markets": settings characterized by limited supply, high fixed costs, regulatory barriers to entry, geographic constraints, and imperfect information. Demand for childcare is relatively price inelastic in the short run, as parents' labour market participation depends on securing care and they have limited ability to substitute away in response to price changes (Blau 2001). Yet supply does not expand easily in response to price signals. In such conditions, competition does not reliably occur on quality; instead, providers face strong incentives to control costs, particularly labour costs, which constitute the largest share of expenditures. When governments rely primarily on parent fee subsidies rather than direct operational funding tied to wage and quality standards, public money can flow through market structures without reshaping these underlying incentives. The result is

not a textbook competitive market but a constrained one in which cost minimization, rather than quality enhancement, becomes the dominant strategy.

The CWELCC agreement attempts to close this leakage through a series of instruments: fee caps, wage grids, capital funding, and cost-control mechanisms. Each represents a site of negotiation between public and market logics. Fee caps are designed to deliver rapid affordability gains, committing jurisdictions to reduce average parent fees to $10 per day. Yet affordability reforms alter the mechanism through which scarcity is distributed rather than eliminating scarcity itself. In many provinces, demand for licensed childcare already exceeds available supply; absent price controls, access is rationed primarily through price, with higher fees limiting entry for lower- and middle-income families. When governments introduce fee caps without parallel investments in supply expansion, workforce growth, and capital infrastructure, the rationing mechanism shifts from price to queuing. Spaces are allocated through waitlists, informal networks, or first-come-first-served systems rather than through ability to pay. While this shift improves affordability and equity at the point of access, it can intensify visible shortages if capacity does not expand concurrently. As the literature cautions, affordability measures divorced from workforce stabilization and capital planning risk reproducing inequities under new institutional forms (Beach et al. 2023; Macdonald 2025).

Wage grids, in turn, address one of the sector's most enduring challenges: chronic underpayment of ECEs. The You Bet I Care! study showed that the average ECE wage, adjusted for inflation, stagnated for decades and remains below the living wage in most regions (Doherty et al. 2000; Friendly, Beach, Aruran, Cossette, Lillace and Forer 2024). Feminist scholars identify this as a form of gendered devaluation: the societal tendency to undervalue care work because it is associated with women's "natural" labour (Bakker 2007). CWELCC's wage grid

provisions seek to professionalize the workforce by linking compensation to qualifications and experience, thereby addressing both quality and gender equity (Beach et al. 2023).

However, implementation remains inconsistent. Some provinces (Manitoba, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island) have introduced explicit wage scales with government-funded top-ups. Others, including Alberta, have relied on voluntary or centre-administered wage supports, perpetuating disparities between public and private providers (Government of Alberta 2023). Without binding provincial frameworks, the structural gender inequality that underpins low wages remains largely intact.

Capital and cost-control mechanisms reveal the political economy tensions within CWELCC. Federal funding explicitly prioritizes non-profit and public expansion, yet provinces have interpreted this clause differently. Manitoba has committed to developing new non-profit centres, supported by publicly owned facilities and direct capital grants (Beach et al. 2023). Alberta, in contrast, negotiated amendments allowing for-profit operators to access capital funding through its Cost Control Framework and For-Profit Expansion Plan, introduced in 2023. While the framework imposes some cost-reporting requirements, it effectively legitimizes continued profit extraction from public funds. Critics argue this undermines the non-profit-first principle and opens the door to multinational corporate chains expanding within CWELCC's footprint.

This struggle reflects the broader influence of corporate lobbying in the childcare sector. Over the past decade, large for-profit providers such as BrightPath Early Learning (owned by Busy Bees, a UK-based multinational) and Kids & Company have emerged as vocal advocates for "flexible" childcare markets. Their discourse aligns with neoliberal tropes of choice, efficiency, and entrepreneurship, often positioning private expansion as necessary for meeting

parental demand (Friendly 2019; Mahon 2009b). In Alberta, for example, industry representatives successfully lobbied for policy changes allowing corporate centres to access federal funding, arguing that excluding for-profits would limit capacity growth (Government of Alberta 2023).

Evidence of coordinated industry advocacy is visible in the federal Registry of Lobbyists. For example, Kids & Company—owned by the Grandir Group, a France-based multinational childcare corporation—has registered federal lobbying activities in 2025 that reference the CWELCC program and related regulatory frameworks. Registry filings indicate communications with federal officials concerning funding structures, eligibility criteria, and program implementation (Office of the Commissioner of Lobbying of Canada 2025). As a multi-provincial operator receiving substantial public transfers under CWELCC agreements, the corporation has a direct financial stake in how federal and provincial governments define eligibility for for-profit providers. Such disclosures illustrate that the accommodation of commercial operators is not merely a passive legacy of provincial structure, but an actively negotiated outcome shaped by organized corporate advocacy.

Opposing these market forces are feminist and community-based advocacy movements that have long framed childcare as a public good and social right. Organizations like Child Care Now, the Canadian Child Care Federation (CCCF), and the Childcare Resource and Research Unit (CRRU), and many unions have documented the social, economic, and developmental costs of commercialization. Drawing on feminist political economy, these movements argue that public investment should serve collective welfare, not private gain. They have successfully influenced federal discourse, evident in the 2021 budget's framing of childcare as "social

infrastructure," a rhetorical and policy shift aligning with their decades-long advocacy (Beach et al. 2023).

The enactment of Bill C-35, the Canada Early Learning and Child Care Act in 2024 provides the first post-WWII statutory foundation for a federal role in early learning and childcare. The Act affirms that the purpose of federal involvement is to support a Canada-wide system that is accessible, affordable, inclusive, and high quality, and it commits the federal government to providing long-term funding to provinces, territories, and Indigenous governing bodies to advance these objectives (Government of Canada 2024a). Bill C-35 also establishes principles to guide federal–provincial agreements, including public accountability, transparency, and respect for provincial and Indigenous jurisdiction, while creating a National Advisory Council on Early Learning and Child Care to provide ongoing advice and public reporting. In doing so, the Act formalizes childcare as a permanent area of federal policy concern rather than a time-limited program subject to shifting political priorities (Government of Canada 2024a).

At the same time, the structure of Bill C-35 reflects the limits of federal authority and the compromises of Canadian federalism. While the Act commits the federal government to sustained funding and articulates system-level goals, it does not create an enforceable individual right to childcare, nor does it prescribe ownership models or restrict the participation of for-profit providers. Implementation remains contingent on bilateral agreements with provinces and territories, leaving substantial discretion over how principles such as affordability, quality, and accessibility are operationalized (Government of Canada 2024a). As a result, Bill C-35 secures continuity and policy stability at the federal level without fully resolving the tension between public system-building and market-based delivery. The Act therefore institutionalizes the public-

good framing achieved through decades of advocacy, while leaving the underlying struggle over commercialization to be negotiated within provincial policy choices.

Bill C-35 codifies federal commitments to long-term funding, affirms principles of accessibility, affordability, inclusivity, and quality, and establishes a National Advisory Council (Government of Canada 2024a). In this sense, it represents an important step toward institutionalizing childcare as social infrastructure rather than discretionary programming. However, Bill C-35 is best understood as framework legislation rather than structural legislation. It articulates guiding principles and stabilizes federal fiscal participation, but it does not mandate a particular ownership model, prohibit for-profit provision, or create enforceable national standards for workforce compensation or public delivery. Provincial governments retain wide discretion in how they interpret and implement CWELCC within their jurisdictional authority.

The distinction is therefore not between "legislation" and "no legislation," but between forms of legislation. If third-order change entails a paradigm shift from childcare as market commodity to childcare as public good, then the critical question is whether legislation restructures the underlying governance model or merely formalizes funding commitments within an existing mixed-market system. Bill C-35 advances the former rhetorically but leaves the latter largely intact institutionally. Its significance lies in embedding federal responsibility; its limitation lies in its reliance on provincial implementation within uneven political economies.

Social movement theory helps explain how these actors achieved influence despite limited institutional power. Through framing processes, strategically linking childcare to gender equality, economic growth, and children's rights, advocates broadened the policy coalition for universal childcare (Mahon 2009c). The alignment of feminist, labour, and economic arguments helped construct a broad base of political legitimacy for public investment in childcare, linking

gender equality, labour market participation, and economic growth within a shared policy narrative (Mahon 2009b). However, the persistence of for-profit lobbying indicates that commercialization remains a resilient counter-paradigm, rooted in neoliberal governance structures and supported by powerful business interests. Social movement theory, particularly the political process model (McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1998), helps explain why the strength of public and non-profit childcare advocacy varies across provinces despite the presence of a nationally coordinated coalition. The model emphasizes that policy outcomes depend not only on movement resources but on political opportunity structures—such as party alignment, elite allies, institutional openness, and the configuration of intergovernmental authority. In provinces where advocacy organizations are embedded in longstanding community networks and enjoy sympathetic governing parties, claims for non-profit expansion are more likely to translate into institutional reform. In jurisdictions where governing elites are more aligned with market-oriented actors, commercial providers retain greater influence over implementation. Variation in CWELCC outcomes thus reflects not simply the durability of neoliberal ideas, but the differential alignment of political opportunity structures and mobilizing networks across provinces.

This contestation illustrates what Hall (1993) conceptualized as the struggle between paradigms in processes of third-order change. CWELCC has introduced new tools and targets, but the underlying struggle between market and public paradigms persists. Feminist political economy helps interpret this impasse: structural gender inequality and capitalist imperatives constrain the potential for transformative change, even within ostensibly progressive reforms.

From a federalism perspective, this tension is amplified by asymmetrical implementation. CWELCC's bilateral agreements allow provinces to tailor policies to local contexts, preserving

flexibility but also fragmenting the national vision. In practice, this means that provinces with strong public or non-profit sectors, like Manitoba and Quebec, can advance toward decommodified models, while market-oriented jurisdictions, like Alberta, risk reconstituting old inequities under new funding regimes (Beach et al. 2023). The outcome is not yet determined: whether CWELCC consolidates a more publicly planned childcare system or reinforces a dual structure of subsidized markets will depend on the political choices provinces make in the coming years. Advocacy movements continue to shape this trajectory. Feminist and labour coalitions have called for embedding CWELCC within durable legislative frameworks, sometimes invoking the Canada Health Act as a model for conditional federal standards. The analogy, however, must be understood carefully. Canadian health care is not purely public in its delivery; it combines public financing and national standards with mixed modes of service provision. Its significance lies not in exclusive state operation, but in the institutionalization of universality, portability, accessibility, and public accountability through federal legislation.

In this sense, the reference to health care functions as an ideal type rather than a literal template. The argument advanced here is not that childcare must replicate the precise structure of Medicare, but that durable statutory commitments, combined with sustained public financing and enforceable standards, increase the political costs of retrenchment. Universal childcare requires not only funding but institutional design capable of resisting fragmentation and privatization pressures. Without such safeguards, the system risks reverting to the uneven, marketized patchwork that characterized the pre-CWELCC era (Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005; Friendly 2019).

Despite the weight of evidence against commercialization, debates persist about the role of for-profit providers in Canada's early learning and childcare landscape. Proponents of market-

based delivery argue that private operators can expand capacity more rapidly and offer flexibility to parents, particularly in urban areas where demand exceeds supply. They contend that diversity in provider types enhances parental choice and innovation (Government of Alberta 2023).

While these arguments resonate with long-standing neoliberal narratives, empirical research challenges their assumptions. Studies consistently find that for-profit operators expand primarily in higher-income, high-demand markets, leaving persistent "childcare deserts" in low-income and rural regions (Prentice 2019). Quality differences are not neutralised by regulation alone; even under identical standards, non-profit and public centres outperform for-profits on staff stability and child outcomes (Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005). Furthermore, the promise of flexibility often masks inequities in accessibility: parents may technically have "choice," but only if they can afford it (Friendly 2019).

From a feminist political economy standpoint, such counterarguments fail to grapple with the structural nature of care inequality. Childcare is not a typical market good; it is embedded in the reproduction of the labour force and the social fabric itself. The commodification of care externalizes its social costs onto women, workers, and children—costs that markets cannot internalize and that manifest as gender inequality, precarious labour, and uneven child development. Feminist political economists argue that childcare systems are not merely economic institutions but key sites of social reproduction where capitalism's structural contradictions become visible. As Nancy Fraser (2022) contends, capitalist economies rely upon "background conditions" — including care work — that they do not fully value or compensate. In seeking profit and accumulation, market systems simultaneously depend upon and destabilize the very reproductive labour that sustains them. Childcare thus occupies what Fraser (2022) calls a boundary zone between production and social reproduction: a sphere essential to economic

functioning yet persistently subordinated to market imperatives. The commercialization of childcare exemplifies this dynamic, as efforts to extract profit from care provision risk undermining the relational, labour-intensive foundations upon which high-quality care depends. CWELCC, in this view, represents both an opportunity and a battleground: a state-led intervention that could decommodify care, but one still constrained by the logics of fiscal federalism and the politics of austerity.

An intersectional lens deepens this analysis by highlighting how childcare policy interacts with axes of race, class, and Indigeneity. Indigenous communities have historically been excluded from mainstream childcare frameworks, and colonial legacies continue to shape disparities in access and governance. The Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care (IELCC) Framework, co-developed in 2018 with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis partners, operates as a distinctions-based funding stream separate from provincial and territorial CWELCC agreements (Government of Canada 2018; 2021a). Under CWELCC, federal funding for Indigenous ELCC flows directly to Indigenous governments and organizations rather than through provincial bilateral agreements, affirming Indigenous jurisdiction in principle. However, this parallel structure has produced uneven coordination in practice. While some regions have negotiated trilateral arrangements to align Indigenous-led expansion with provincial workforce and capital planning, in many jurisdictions Indigenous ELCC remains administratively and fiscally siloed from broader CWELCC implementation. Funding timelines, reporting requirements, and wage grid policies are not consistently harmonized, creating disparities in educator compensation, infrastructure development, and long-term stability. These gaps raise ongoing questions about whether CWELCC advances Indigenous self-determination or merely overlays a federal funding regime onto existing jurisdictional fragmentation.

At the same time, racialized and immigrant women remain disproportionately represented in the low-paid childcare workforce (Statistics Canada 2022), illustrating how gendered and racialized labour hierarchies persist even within ostensibly universal systems. An intersectional analysis therefore demands that childcare reform address not only gender inequality but also the colonial governance structures and racialized labour segmentation that sustain precarity in the sector (Bakker 2007; Crenshaw 1989).

Federalism further complicates the pursuit of equity. While decentralisation allows for local responsiveness, it also fragments accountability. Canada's bilateral approach to CWELCC reflects an ongoing balancing act between national coordination and provincial autonomy. In provinces like Manitoba, strong advocacy networks and community-rooted governance have translated CWELCC's principles into concrete progress; expanding non-profit capacity, stabilising wages, and embedding affordability measures. In Alberta, where market ideology remains dominant, provincial interpretation of CWELCC has prioritised flexibility for private providers over structural reform (Beach et al. 2023). This divergence underscores how federalism mediates the degree to which national policy goals can achieve transformative, third-order change.

While the Alberta–Canada bilateral agreement states that both parties "aspire to" prioritize not-for-profit and public expansion, it does not exclude for-profit operators from participation. This aspirational language leaves substantial room for provincial interpretation. In practice, Alberta has maintained a mixed-market approach, permitting for-profit centres to access CWELCC funding under its Cost Control Framework and Expansion Plan. Recent provincial reporting indicates that a significant proportion of newly created or converted spaces have been located within existing for-profit centres rather than through the development of new non-profit

providers (Beach et al. 2023; Government of Alberta 2023). Thus, despite rhetorical commitments to non-profit prioritization, the structural dominance of commercial provision in Alberta remains largely intact.

This divergence between federal aspiration and provincial implementation underscores how federalism mediates the degree to which national policy goals can achieve transformative, third-order change. Where ownership structures are already marketized, flexibility clauses may reinforce rather than displace commercial logics.

The concept of third-order change (Hall 1993) provides a valuable lens for situating CWELCC's transformative potential. First-order changes involve new tools in response to new experience and knowledge (e.g., wage grids), and second-order changes involve changes in response to past experience (e.g., affordability). Third-order change, however, reconfigures the paradigm, the goals, instrument settings, and instruments, the underlying logic of governance. CWELCC aspires to such change by redefining childcare as essential social infrastructure. Yet, as demonstrated, its implementation remains bounded by neoliberal legacies. Fee caps and wage grids, while progressive, operate within a mixed-market system where for-profit providers still play a substantial role. The durability of a public-good paradigm will depend on whether governments institutionalise childcare as a right, not merely a service.

A rights-based framework, anchored in CEDAW and the UNCRC, demands precisely this. CEDAW obligates states to enable women's economic participation through public childcare, while the UNCRC asserts children's right to development and education (United Nations 1979; United Nations 1989). Embedding these obligations in domestic policy would codify childcare as a social right akin to healthcare. However, absent legislative entrenchment, CWELCC's gains remain politically reversible. Feminist scholars warn that unless childcare is

treated as a public entitlement, universally accessible, adequately funded, and publicly governed, it risks retrenchment under fiscal austerity or political turnover (Prentice 2005).

The concept of path dependency illuminates how institutional legacies shape this future. Provinces like Manitoba, with robust non-profit infrastructures and community governance, are better positioned to consolidate a public model. Alberta's entrenched market architecture, by contrast, creates feedback loops that perpetuate private provision: established for-profit chains wield lobbying power, while fragmented governance limits regulatory enforcement. This feedback is not immutable but changing them requires sustained political will and organized civil society mobilization (Mahon 2009a).

Social movements play a pivotal role in this process. Decades of feminist advocacy, from the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (1970) through the work of Child Care Now, the Canadian Child Care Federation, and the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, have built the intellectual and moral foundation for universal childcare. Their activism reframed childcare from a "private problem" to a public policy issue, leveraging intersectional and rights-based arguments to shift federal discourse. The success of CWELCC itself owes much to these movements, whose evidence-based campaigns helped convince policymakers that universal childcare was both socially just and economically rational. Yet these same movements now warn against complacency: without vigilance, the expansion of for-profit care could hollow out CWELCC's transformative potential.

Bringing these strands together, the literature reveals that childcare policy in Canada sits at the intersection of structural boundary struggles over social reproduction. Feminist political economy demonstrates that care work constitutes a foundational "background condition" of capitalist accumulation—essential to sustaining the labour force yet systematically undervalued

because it is feminized (Bakker 2007). Nancy Fraser (2022) sharpens this insight by arguing that capitalism depends upon social reproduction while simultaneously destabilizing it through commodification and fiscal retrenchment. Childcare policy thus becomes a site where the tension between accumulation and care is institutionalized: market logics seek cost containment and profit extraction, while the social need for relational, labour-intensive care resists such compression.

Intersectional analysis deepens this framework by showing how the burdens of this contradiction are unevenly distributed. Racialized, immigrant, and Indigenous women are disproportionately concentrated in low-paid care work, while marginalized communities face greater barriers to accessing high-quality services. The commodification of care therefore reproduces not only gender inequality but also racialized and colonial hierarchies within the sector.

Federalism mediates these dynamics unevenly across provinces. Because childcare governance is decentralized, the degree to which social reproduction is shielded from market pressures varies according to provincial political economies and institutional legacies. In this sense, federalism becomes part of the structural terrain through which capitalism's contradictions are managed rather than resolved.

Rights-based theory, grounded in CEDAW and the UNCRC, offers a countervailing normative project: the attempt to reconstitute care as a matter of social citizenship rather than market exchange. Together, these perspectives provide a coherent theoretical framework for assessing CWELCC—not simply as a policy reform, but as an ongoing effort to renegotiate the boundary between market accumulation and the social reproduction of care.

In sum, the commercialization of childcare in Canada is neither an inevitable outcome nor an accidental byproduct of policy design, it is the result of political choices embedded in institutional histories and power relations. The CWELCC agreement represents a critical juncture: an attempt to reframe childcare as public infrastructure within a federation still structured by market logics. Whether it consolidates into a universal, publicly governed system or reverts to subsidized markets and a patchwork system will depend on how provinces navigate competing pressures of ownership, ideology, and intergovernmental negotiation.

Debates Over Public Childcare Expansion

Arguments against the expansion of publicly delivered childcare systems often focus on the fiscal implications associated with both capital expenditures and ongoing operating costs (see: Real Women of Canada 2019). Establishing publicly owned childcare centres requires significant upfront investment in physical infrastructure, including land acquisition, construction, renovation, and licensing compliance. Unlike privately operated centres that rely on private capital or market investment, public provision typically requires governments to assume responsibility for these capital costs.

Macdonald and Friendly (2023) note,

> "Planning—in the sense of community or urban planning of public goods—is a public government function. Governments must lead in planning child care expansion. Key elements of publicly planned child care systems include supply and demand analysis, design standards, multi-year capital plans with inherent priority setting, construction oversight, and workforce recruitment and retention strategies (such as publicly funded and competitive wage grids)" (30).

In addition to capital costs, operating expenditures are also frequently cited as a concern in debates over expanding public childcare systems. Childcare is a highly labour-intensive sector, with staffing costs representing the largest component of operating budgets for licensed centres. Consequently, proposals to expand publicly delivered childcare often intersect with broader discussions about workforce compensation. If ECEs were incorporated into the public sector workforce, wages and benefits could potentially rise to align more closely with other publicly funded education or care occupations (Halfon 2021). While advocates argue that such changes would improve workforce stability and recognize the professional value of care work, critics contend that increased wages and public-sector benefits could significantly raise operating costs for governments (Real Women of Canada 2019).

These concerns are particularly salient given longstanding workforce challenges in the childcare sector. ECEs across Canada have historically experienced relatively low wages and limited employment benefits compared with other occupations requiring similar levels of training (Friendly et al. 2026). Efforts to address recruitment and retention challenges therefore frequently involve proposals to improve compensation and working conditions. However, opponents of expanded public provision sometimes frame these potential wage gains as evidence that publicly delivered systems would be financially unsustainable. As a result, debates over public childcare expansion often hinge on differing perspectives regarding the role of the state in financing and delivering care services, as well as the extent to which childcare should be treated as a public good or a market-based service.

One of the primary concerns raised by critics of expanded public childcare systems relates to the significant capital investments required to build new childcare spaces. Unlike privately operated centres that rely on private financing or market investment to establish

facilities, publicly delivered systems require governments to fund the construction, renovation, and licensing of childcare facilities directly. These capital expenditures can be substantial in the early phases of system expansion, particularly in jurisdictions attempting to rapidly increase the number of regulated spaces. However, research examining childcare expansion suggests that these upfront costs should be understood as transitional investments associated with building system capacity rather than permanent fiscal burdens. For example, Prentice's (2020) analysis of childcare affordability reforms in Manitoba notes that while capital expenditures associated with expanding childcare infrastructure may initially exceed fiscal returns, these costs are concentrated in the first five to ten years of system growth. Over time, increased labour force participation and economic activity generated by accessible childcare can offset these initial expenditures (Prentice 2020).

Economic analyses of large-scale childcare systems further suggest that public investment in childcare can generate substantial fiscal returns that help offset both capital and operating costs. Evidence from Quebec's universal low-fee childcare program demonstrates that expanding access to affordable childcare significantly increased women's participation in the labour force. Fortin, Godbout, and St-Cerny (2012) estimate that approximately 70,000 additional mothers entered the workforce as a result of the program by 2008, generating an estimated $5.1 billion increase in provincial domestic income in that year alone (Fortin et al. 2012). Increased employment produced higher tax revenues and reduced reliance on government transfers, resulting in significant fiscal returns for both the provincial and federal governments. Their analysis concludes that for every $100 spent on childcare subsidies by the Quebec government, approximately $104 was returned to the province through increased revenues, with an additional $43 accruing to the federal government (Fortin et al. 2012). These findings suggest

that while childcare expansion may require substantial public investment in the short term, particularly with respect to capital infrastructure, the long-term economic effects of increased labour force participation can partially or fully offset these costs.

These dynamics illustrate why debates over public childcare expansion frequently focus on the timing and distribution of costs and benefits. Capital expenditures associated with constructing new childcare spaces occur immediately, while the economic returns generated through increased labour force participation and higher tax revenues tend to accumulate gradually over time. As a result, opponents of public childcare expansion often emphasize the short-term fiscal commitments required to build system capacity, whereas proponents highlight the longer-term economic and social returns associated with accessible early learning and childcare programs.

In practice, these debates reflect broader tensions within childcare policy between market-based provision and publicly coordinated systems. While privately operated centres may rely on parent fees and market revenues to offset labour costs, publicly delivered systems would require governments to assume a greater share of both capital and operating expenditures. For critics, this raises concerns about long-term fiscal commitments; for proponents, it reflects the necessary public investment required to stabilize the childcare workforce and expand access to affordable care.

Wage Differences Between Provinces

The differences in wages and benefits in Manitoba versus Alberta reflect deeper structural distinctions between the two provincial childcare systems. Manitoba's childcare sector developed through a model combining supply-side operational funding with regulated parent fees, enabling greater provincial coordination of workforce policies, wage structures, and

benefits. Alberta's system, by contrast, has historically relied more heavily on market financing and provider-level decision-making. Consequently, workforce compensation remains more decentralized, with individual operators retaining significant discretion over wage setting.

The contrast illustrates how funding architecture shapes the governance of childcare labour markets. Manitoba's longstanding supply-side funding model enables the province to coordinate wages, benefits, and workforce policy across the sector, while Alberta's more market-oriented system preserves greater employer discretion over compensation and employment conditions (Friendly et al. 2026).

Evidence suggests that ECEs in Alberta earn somewhat higher wages than their counterparts in Manitoba. Labour market data compiled by the Government of Canada Job Bank, based on Statistics Canada occupational wage data, estimate the median hourly wage for early childhood educators in Alberta at approximately $19.00 per hour, compared with roughly $18.00 per hour in Manitoba (Government of Canada 2024b; Government of Canada 2024c). This difference is notable given that Manitoba has historically maintained a more structured regulatory framework for childcare services, including operational funding and wage supports. One explanation lies in broader provincial labour market dynamics. Alberta's economy has historically exhibited higher average wages across sectors due to the influence of resource industries and higher prevailing wage levels, which can raise wage expectations across service-sector occupations through regional labour market competition. From a labour market segmentation perspective, wages in fragmented service sectors such as childcare are often shaped less by coordinated workforce policy and more by local labour supply and demand conditions. Labour market segmentation theory suggests that occupations located in decentralized, low-regulation service sectors tend to experience wage variation across regions because

compensation is determined primarily by local labour markets rather than institutional wage-setting mechanisms (Doeringer and Piore 1971). Research on care work similarly finds that sectors such as childcare—characterized by fragmented provision and relatively weak professionalization—often exhibit uneven wage structures that reflect regional labour market dynamics rather than coordinated public workforce policy (Folbre 2012; Grimshaw and Rubery 2015). In provinces such as Alberta, where childcare provision is more heavily market-based and reliant on private providers, wages may therefore reflect localized labour market pressures rather than standardized provincial wage grids. As a result, higher average wages in Alberta do not necessarily indicate stronger public investment in workforce development but instead reflect broader regional wage structures and the dynamics of a more market-oriented childcare system.

It is also important to note that provincial wage averages may mask substantial variation within jurisdictions. In market-based childcare systems where centres independently determine compensation, wages can vary considerably depending on provider type, centre finances, and local labour market pressures. As a result, some educators may earn wages above the provincial median while others remain in lower-paid positions with limited benefits or job security. This variability highlights a broader feature of market-oriented childcare systems: rather than producing consistent workforce conditions, fragmented provision can generate uneven compensation structures across providers. In this sense, the modest wage advantage observed in Alberta does not necessarily indicate stronger workforce policy, but instead reflects the decentralized dynamics of a system where compensation is shaped primarily by market conditions.

Capital Costs of Expanding Childcare

Beyond ideological preferences, concerns about the capital costs associated with expanding publicly delivered childcare emerged as an important factor shaping provincial policy choices. Building a publicly owned childcare system requires significant upfront investment in infrastructure, including the construction or retrofitting of facilities, the acquisition of land, and long-term maintenance responsibilities. These capital requirements are often framed by governments as prohibitive, particularly in provinces where fiscal restraint remains a dominant policy orientation. As Prentice (2020) notes, affordable childcare systems require either sustained public investment or cross-subsidization through higher parent fees, highlighting the central role of public spending in maintaining accessible services. Within this context, provinces may view expansion through existing private and non-profit operators as a more politically and fiscally feasible strategy, as it allows governments to increase spaces without assuming full responsibility for capital development.

At the same time, the policy framing and institutional placement of childcare within provincial governments further shapes how these costs are interpreted. In both Alberta and Manitoba, childcare has historically been situated within social services or family policy portfolios rather than within core education systems. This institutional positioning reinforces the treatment of childcare as a targeted social program rather than as universal public infrastructure comparable to schools. As a result, large-scale public capital investment in childcare facilities is less readily normalized within government budgeting processes. When childcare is framed primarily as a support for labour market participation or family policy rather than as a foundational public good, governments may be more inclined to rely on mixed-market delivery models that distribute capital responsibility across private, community, and non-profit actors.

This institutional and discursive context helps explain why both provinces have pursued expansion strategies that accommodate commercial providers despite federal policy signals encouraging growth in the public and non-profit sectors.

Expanding publicly delivered childcare would also have important implications for workforce compensation and government expenditures. Care workforce policy in Canada notes that improved job quality—including higher wages, benefits, and career progression—has long been a central goal of advocates for public childcare expansion. At the same time, labour costs already constitute the largest share of childcare operating expenses, meaning that improvements in wages and benefits significantly affect system costs. Federal–provincial childcare agreements similarly emphasize the need for wage supports and workforce stabilization measures to retain educators in the sector. As a result, a shift toward publicly delivered childcare would likely require governments to assume higher ongoing labour costs associated with standardized compensation, benefits, and potentially unionized employment structures. While these investments may contribute to workforce stability and service quality, they nonetheless represent an important fiscal consideration in debates over expanding public childcare provision.

In publicly operated systems, early childhood educators are more likely to be employed within public or publicly funded institutional structures where standardized wage grids, benefits, and collective bargaining agreements are more common. These arrangements would likely raise operating costs relative to systems where centres independently determine compensation. At present, however, low wages in the childcare sector reflect a broader environment of insufficient public investment rather than the inherent cost of delivering care. As Prentice (2020) argues, in systems with limited supply-side funding, inadequate wages for staff and high fees for parents are effectively inevitable because centres historically had to rely heavily on parent fees to sustain

operations. Manitoba's current childcare system illustrates this dynamic: most centres are non-profit organizations established and governed by parent boards, resulting in what Prentice (2020) describes as a "popcorn" model of service development, where centres emerge only when parents organize and fundraise rather than through coordinated public planning. While increasing wages and improving job quality would require higher public operating funding, economic research suggests that these expenditures can generate returns that exceed their costs. Studies of childcare expansion—including analyses of Quebec's universal childcare program—find that lower parent fees increase labour force participation, particularly among mothers, thereby generating higher tax revenues and economic growth that offset a substantial portion of public expenditures (Cleveland and Krashinsky 1998; Cleveland 2018; Fortin, Godbout, and St-Cerny 2012; Heckman 2006; Prentice 2020). In this sense, increased public spending on childcare wages and operating costs should be understood not only as a fiscal obligation but also as a form of social infrastructure investment capable of producing broader economic returns.

Policy Framing and Institutional Location of Childcare

Policy framing provides an important lens for understanding how governments conceptualize childcare within broader policy agendas. Framing analysis examines how certain aspects of reality are emphasized or foregrounded in policy discourse while others are backgrounded or excluded. In doing so, framing shapes how policy problems are defined, which actors are recognized as legitimate stakeholders, and what types of policy solutions are considered appropriate. As scholars of interpretive policy analysis note, framing involves processes of meaning construction in which particular narratives and interpretations influence how policy debates unfold (van Hulst et al. 2025).

The institutional location of childcare policy within government ministries can provide insight into how childcare is framed by policymakers. In Manitoba, responsibility for early learning and child care is situated within the Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning, linking childcare policy with broader educational objectives. This institutional placement reinforces a framing of childcare as part of the educational system and as a foundational component of early childhood development. Situating childcare within the education portfolio also aligns with policy approaches that emphasize professionalization of the early childhood workforce, coordinated wage frameworks, and the integration of childcare into public education systems.

In Alberta, childcare has historically been located within ministries associated more closely with labour market participation and economic development rather than education. For several years, childcare policy was overseen by the Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade (Friendly et al. 2026), reflecting a framing of childcare primarily as a tool to support labour force participation and economic growth. This institutional location positioned childcare policy within a broader economic development agenda, emphasizing the role of childcare in enabling parents, particularly mothers, to participate in the workforce.

In May 2025, responsibility for childcare was transferred to Alberta's Ministry of Education and Childcare (Friendly et al. 2026), marking a shift in the formal institutional location of the policy file. While this change potentially signals an evolving recognition of childcare's educational dimensions, the historical positioning of childcare within economic ministries illustrates how policy framing can influence the objectives associated with childcare programs. When childcare is framed primarily as an economic support, policy discussions tend to focus on labour supply, affordability for parents, and the role of childcare in supporting

economic productivity. By contrast, when childcare is situated within education systems, policy discourse often emphasizes child development, professionalization of educators, and long-term social investment (Décieux and Deindl 2025).

These differing institutional placements highlight how framing influences the priorities and policy tools associated with childcare governance. Manitoba's placement of childcare within an education ministry aligns with a policy approach that emphasizes coordinated system-building and workforce professionalization. Alberta's historical placement within economic portfolios reflects a framing of childcare primarily as labour market infrastructure. As framing analysis suggests, such institutional arrangements shape how childcare policy problems are defined and which policy solutions are considered legitimate within each jurisdiction (van Hulst et al. 2025).

THEORY AND METHODS: A FEMINIST POLITICAL ECONOMY APPROACH TO CHILDCARE POLICY

Theory

Childcare policy in Canada sits at the intersection of gendered labour, political ideology, federalism, and market forces. Over decades, scholars have shown that the organization of early learning and childcare reflects deeper tensions between the social organization of reproduction and neoliberal policy structures (Bakker 2007). The CWELCC agreement marks the most significant federal intervention in childcare in Canadian history, yet the policy landscape it enters remains shaped by longstanding provincial differences, uneven governance, and the continued presence of commercial providers. Understanding how commercialization persists under CWELCC requires a theoretical framework that brings feminist political economy, federalism, rights-based approaches, and institutional path dependency into direct conversation. These frameworks inform the historically informed comparative qualitative approach used in this study

and guide the analysis of how Manitoba and Alberta interpret and implement CWELCC within their distinct political economies.

Within this framework, privatization represents more than a change in provider type; it reflects a shift in how childhood itself is socially organized and valued. When childcare is delivered through profit-seeking firms, children's enrolment becomes the revenue-generating unit of the enterprise. Public transfers and parent fees are converted into market income, and programmatic decisions—staffing levels beyond regulatory minimums, wage scales, capital investments, and geographic expansion—are shaped by cost containment and surplus generation. Market allocation distributes spaces according to profitability rather than developmental or community need, favouring affluent or high-density areas over rural and lower-income communities. Because labour constitutes the largest share of operating costs, wages and working conditions become primary sites of economization, reinforcing the historical gendered undervaluation of care work. In this sense, commodification does not simply mean that fees are charged; it denotes the reorientation of early childhood services around exchange value rather than social use value. Childhood becomes embedded in circuits of accumulation, and access to care is mediated by market logics rather than collective planning (Bakker 2007; Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005; Friendly 2019).

Childcare in Canada has long been undervalued and treated as a private family responsibility. Feminist political economy argues that this stems from the gendered division of labour defining care as women's unpaid or low-paid work (Bakker 2007). The historical development of childcare policy reinforces this pattern: childcare services emerged not as universal social rights but as targeted supports tied to labour market needs, including wartime

nurseries in the 1940s and means-tested programs for low-income mothers in the postwar period (Friendly and Prentice 2009).

By the 1980s and 1990s, neoliberal restructuring translated this residual model into an explicitly market-oriented system. Federal transfers for social programs were reduced and consolidated under the Canada Health and Social Transfer in 1996, weakening national coordination and shifting fiscal responsibility to provinces. Rather than building publicly funded operational systems, most provinces relied on parent fee subsidies, encouraging private operators to enter and expand in the sector (Mahon 2009c). On the ground, this shift was visible in the rapid growth of for-profit centres in provinces such as Alberta and Ontario; widening interprovincial disparities in access and fees; persistent shortages of licensed spaces; and heavy reliance on user fees to finance operations. By the early 2000s, parent fees constituted the majority of childcare revenue in many provinces, and Canada had among the highest out-of-pocket childcare costs in the OECD (Friendly et al. 2021).

Workforce conditions reflected the same market logic. Early childhood educators experienced stagnant wages, limited benefits, and high turnover, with compensation frequently hovering near minimum wage despite increasing credential requirements (Doherty et al. 2000). Expansion tended to occur in higher-income urban markets where demand was most profitable, while rural and low-income communities remained underserved. Together, these empirical patterns—fee dependence, uneven expansion, for-profit growth, and workforce precarity—signaled the entrenchment of care as a commodity rather than a universally planned public service.

Within this context, ownership structure plays a central role in shaping quality, equity, and workforce outcomes. A substantial body of Canadian research demonstrates what scholars

term the “non-profit advantage”: non-profit and publicly operated childcare centres consistently outperform for-profit centres across key indicators, including staff qualifications, wage levels, retention, and observed program quality (Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005; Doherty et al. 2000). These differences are not incidental but structural. Because labour accounts for the majority of operating costs in childcare, the extraction of profit necessarily places downward pressure on wages and staffing stability (Cleveland 2015). Empirical studies show that for-profit centres are more likely to pay lower wages, experience higher staff turnover, and operate with fewer qualified educators, factors directly associated with lower quality and reduced continuity of care for children (Doherty et al. 2000; Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005). The ownership effect, therefore, is not merely administrative but constitutive: governance structure shapes how public funds are distributed, whether surpluses are reinvested in quality or extracted as profit, and ultimately how equitable and stable the system becomes.

These dynamics disproportionately affect the early childhood education workforce, which is overwhelmingly composed of women and marked by significant racialization and precarity. Women account for approximately 96 percent of early childhood educators in Canada, and a growing share of the workforce is composed of immigrant and racialized workers, particularly in urban labour markets (Statistics Canada 2023). In 2022, nearly one in three early childhood educators was either foreign-born or a member of a racialized group (Statistics Canada 2022). While this proportion is broadly consistent with Canada’s increasingly diverse population, it remains significant in a sector that is already overwhelmingly feminized. The childcare workforce is more sharply stratified by gender than by race; however, racialized and immigrant women are disproportionately represented in lower-wage care occupations relative to the broader education sector (Statistics Canada 2023). This layering of gender and racial inequality

underscores how social reproduction is structured through intersecting hierarchies rather than a single axis of marginalization. The persistence of for-profit expansion therefore reproduces gendered and racialized inequalities within a workforce already characterized by low wages, limited benefits, and high turnover, reinforcing stratified labour conditions within the childcare system.

Commercialized childcare systems also produce geographic inequities. In provinces where markets dominate, childcare supply expands primarily in high-income and high-demand regions, while rural, low-income, and marginalized communities remain underserved (Beach et al. 2023). This pattern can be understood through the lens of market failure in a more technical sense. Childcare generates substantial positive externalities—supporting child development, labour-force participation, and long-term economic productivity—that exceed the private returns captured by individual providers or families. At the same time, high fixed costs, regulatory requirements, and income-constrained demand limit profitability in lower-density or lower-income areas. As a result, private provision does not allocate supply in accordance with social need, even when demand exists. In this respect, the "failure" lies not in irrational individual choice, but in the structural inability of market incentives to internalize the full social value of care. Prior to the full implementation of CWELCC, approximately one-third of children under age five were enrolled in licensed childcare arrangements, while roughly half participated in any form of non-parental care (Friendly 2019; Statistics Canada 2022). These figures alone do not constitute evidence of market failure, as parental preferences and household trade-offs also shape childcare use. However, survey data and administrative reporting consistently documented long waitlists, unmet demand for licensed spaces, and substantial regional shortages—particularly in urban growth corridors and rural communities. At the same time, high parent fees constrained

access for middle- and lower-income families (Macdonald and Friendly 2020). When persistent excess demand coexists with affordability barriers and limited supply expansion, the outcome reflects not merely individual choice but structural supply constraints. In this context, the predominance of market-led provision did not generate sufficient capacity to meet socially expressed demand, particularly given the positive externalities associated with early childhood education and women's labour-force participation. A rights-based perspective adds another layer of analysis. CEDAW requires states to provide public childcare to enable gender equality in employment, while UNCRC affirms children's right to education and developmental support (United Nations 1979; United Nations 1989).

These divergent trajectories demonstrate the importance of path dependency in understanding how provinces respond to federal policy. Institutional routines, advocacy networks, and existing ownership structures produce self-reinforcing feedback loops (Pierson 2000). In Manitoba, a strong non-profit sector and active advocacy community (including the Child Care Coalition of Manitoba and affiliates of Child Care Now) continue to support public-good approaches and push for decommodification (Beach et al. 2023). However, Manitoba is not insulated from commercial pressures. Private operators remain present within the system, and some have advocated for greater access to expansion funding and regulatory flexibility, particularly as demand has intensified under CWELCC. The province's historical commitment to non-profit delivery constrains large-scale commercialization, but market-oriented actors continue to press for inclusion within federal expansion frameworks.

In Alberta, commercial providers and corporate childcare chains have mobilized successfully to protect access to public funding and influence regulatory frameworks, particularly under the province's Cost Control Framework introduced in 2023 (Government of

Alberta 2023). Yet Alberta also hosts active community, labour, and feminist coalitions advocating for stronger public governance, wage grids, and non-profit prioritization. Organizations affiliated with Child Care Now (Alberta chapter) and local labour networks have continued to frame childcare as a public good and to contest the expansion of for-profit provision. For example, Child Care Now Alberta describes its mission as advocating for "a publicly funded, equitable, accessible, high quality, and culturally appropriate child care system in our province" (Child Care Now Alberta n.d.).

These cross-cutting pressures underscore that neither province is politically monolithic. Rather, CWELCC implementation reflects the relative strength of competing coalitions within each provincial political opportunity structure. The resulting policy trajectory depends less on the absence of opposition and more on which actors are institutionally advantaged within provincial governance arrangements.

Feminist political economy also helps assess CWELCC's potential for transformative change. Drawing on what Hall (1993) writes regarding the typology of policy change, CWELCC clearly introduces first-order change and second-order change. Whether it catalyzes third-order change remains an open question. The persistence of commercial providers, uneven provincial implementation, and absence of rights-based legislation indicate that the underlying paradigm has not fully changed. At the same time, CWELCC opens political space for public investment in social reproduction on a scale previously unseen in Canada.

With these theoretical foundations in place, this study uses a comparative qualitative policy analysis to examine how Manitoba and Alberta implement CWELCC in ways that reinforce or contest commercialization. A comparative approach is appropriate because childcare policy in Canada varies significantly across provinces, reflecting different historical trajectories,

ideological orientations, governance structures, and advocacy environments. Comparing two contrasting cases provides insight into why the same federal policy operates within different institutional contexts and produces divergent outcomes (Olsen 2012; Ragin 1987).

Intersectionality and a Feminist Political Economy of Childcare

An intersectional feminist lens is essential for understanding how childcare policy is experienced across differently situated social groups. Intersectionality, as developed by Crenshaw (1989), analyzes how individuals are positioned at the intersection of multiple axes of subordination—such as race, gender, class, and migration status—and how these intersecting locations shape lived experience and vulnerability. Intersectionality does not itself offer a comprehensive structural theory of capitalism, patriarchy, or colonialism. Rather, it clarifies how individuals are constituted within those broader systems and how domination is experienced at specific social locations.

In the context of childcare, this distinction is analytically important. Feminist political economy explains the structural organization of care work, its commodification, gendering, and incorporation into capitalist accumulation. Intersectionality complements this analysis by specifying how those structural dynamics are unevenly lived. Racialized and immigrant women working as early childhood educators, Indigenous communities navigating jurisdictional fragmentation, and low-income families seeking licensed spaces encounter the childcare system differently because of their distinct social positions. Intersectionality thus does not replace structural explanation; it refines it, illuminating how policy outcomes are mediated through overlapping forms of inequality and why reforms such as CWELCC cannot be evaluated solely at the aggregate level.

For low-income families, childcare costs are often prohibitive, forcing parents, especially female caregivers, into difficult choices between employment and caregiving. Racialized families face additional challenges, including systemic racism that limits access to culturally appropriate services and locates care facilities unevenly, often clustering higher-quality services in wealthier, whiter neighborhoods (Prentice 2019). Queer families may encounter heteronormative assumptions embedded in program design, policies, and staff training, leaving them without truly inclusive care options (Janmohamed 2010; Prentice 2019).

These inequities are compounded by the gendered nature of care work itself. Women continue to bear the disproportionate responsibility for both unpaid care within the home and underpaid care work in the childcare sector. The early childhood education workforce in Canada is overwhelmingly female and chronically undervalued, with low wages, limited benefits, and high turnover rates (The Canadian Child Care Federation 2022). This dynamic reflects what feminist scholars describe as "compulsory altruism" (Hochschild 1983), the societal expectation that women will provide care out of love or duty, rather than as a form of skilled labour deserving of fair compensation. By relying on women's unpaid and underpaid labour, the current system reproduces gender inequality while masking the true social and economic value of care (Bakker 2007).

A feminist political economy perspective highlights how neoliberal childcare policies restructure responsibility for care without necessarily eliminating gendered inequality. Neoliberal frameworks formally position "parents" as rational consumers navigating childcare markets, emphasizing choice, flexibility, and competition. In this sense, policy language is gender neutral. However, these frameworks operate within pre-existing labour market inequalities and household dynamics in which women, on average, earn less and assume a greater share of unpaid

care work. As a result, the burden of navigating market-based childcare systems disproportionately falls on mothers, not because policy explicitly targets women, but because market provision interacts with gendered wage gaps and social norms.

The rhetoric of "parental choice," frequently invoked in provinces such as Alberta (Friendly 2019), presumes that families make autonomous decisions in competitive markets. Yet choice is structured by constraints: income differentials, availability of licensed spaces, inflexible work schedules, and the persistent gender wage gap. In households where male labour is more highly remunerated, the rational allocation of paid and unpaid labour often results in women reducing hours or assuming primary responsibility for childcare coordination. From a feminist political economy perspective, neoliberal policy does not simply reflect these inequalities; it institutionalizes them by shifting responsibility for social reproduction from collective provision to private household decision-making. The outcome is not overtly patriarchal design, but the reproduction of gendered divisions of labour through ostensibly neutral market mechanisms.

Childcare, then, is not merely a site of individual decision-making but a battleground for social justice. When public systems are underfunded, women are pushed back into the home, limiting their participation in paid work, education, and public life. Conversely, when accessible, affordable childcare is provided as a public good, it enables gender equity by supporting women's full participation in society (Friendly and Prentice 2009). A universal public childcare system would not only benefit children and families but also challenge the gendered hierarchies and economic inequities that neoliberalism sustains.

The Auspice Debate: Who Should Deliver Childcare?

At the heart of this thesis is the auspice debate, a long-standing question about *who* should deliver childcare services. In Canada, there are only three possible auspices, or

organizational structures, through which childcare can be provided: public, not-for-profit, and for-profit. While these models may seem similar, the values and outcomes they produce are profoundly different (Friendly 2019).

Public childcare designates services that are fully owned and operated by government, similar to public schools or hospitals. In this model, governments take direct responsibility for both funding and delivery, ensuring universal access and accountability. In Manitoba today, there is no public childcare at all, meaning there are no centers directly operated by provincial or municipal governments (Friendly et al. 2026). In Alberta, there are a few municipally run programs, but they represent a negligible portion of the system. Public childcare is virtually absent from the Canadian landscape, with the notable exception of Quebec's school-based model and a handful of programs in Ontario (Friendly et al. 2024).

Not-for-profit childcare makes up the majority of Canada's current system. These centers are usually run by community boards, non-profits, or charities (Friendly et al. 2024). Any surplus revenue must be reinvested into the program rather than extracted as profit. Not-for-profits often emerge from grassroots organizing, reflecting community needs and values (Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005; Prentice 2009). Manitoba's system is overwhelmingly not-for-profit; 95 percent of its licensed spaces fall under this category (Beach 2022). These programs are closely tied to advocacy groups and unions that fight to keep childcare accessible and equitable (White and Prentice 2016).

For-profit childcare, by contrast, is explicitly market driven. In this model, care is provided by private businesses or corporate chains that generate profit from parent fees and, increasingly, public subsidies. Alberta is Canada's most commercialized province: 66 percent of

its licensed spaces are for-profit, with corporate chains like *Kids & Company*, *BrightPath*, and *Busy Bees* dominating the sector (Beach 2021).

While each delivery model has been defended on various grounds, the normative case for public childcare rests on more than empirical debates about quality. Research consistently shows that public and not-for-profit centres tend to produce more stable and equitable outcomes (Friendly, Vickerson, Mohamed, Rothman, and Nguyen 2021). However, the deeper argument concerns the institutional compatibility between profit-seeking and the moral structure of care relationships. Collins and Ferracioli (2023) do not contend that all forms of pecuniary interest are incompatible with care provision. Rather, they argue that certain forms of care—particularly those involving dependent children and sustained relational vulnerability—require institutional conditions that prioritize attentiveness, continuity, and responsiveness.

For-profit corporate structures are organized around financial return and cost discipline. Careworkers within such organizations operate under managerial and budgetary constraints that shape staffing levels, wage structures, and program design. Even where individual providers are committed to high-quality care, organizational imperatives may limit the extent to which relational priorities can take precedence over financial considerations. A public model seeks to insulate care provision from these pressures by removing shareholder return as a governing objective and reconstituting childcare as a collective social responsibility.

The auspice debate is therefore not just a technical or administrative issue; it is a question of values. Do we see childcare as a collective responsibility, like public education, or as a commodity to be bought and sold? The current mixed market model represents a compromise that ultimately benefits commercial operators. Historically, outside of a few provinces with stronger public or non-profit traditions, many governments have been reluctant to undertake the

capital-intensive investments required to build public childcare infrastructure, instead relying on private and community operators to drive expansion (Friendly et al. 2021; Mahon 2009b). This approach is short-sighted. Once for-profit providers are established, they gain political power and legitimacy, creating what political scientists call path dependency (Mahoney, Walton, Mick, Peritz and Brethour 2007). Early policy choices lock in future trajectories, making it increasingly difficult to reverse course. In childcare, this means that today's decisions will determine whether future generations inherit a public system or a fully commercialized one.

This dynamic is already visible in Alberta, where decades of market-oriented childcare policy have entrenched for-profit delivery and facilitated the emergence of a powerful commercial lobby (Friendly 2019). Private operators have organized into advocacy groups that actively shape policy debates, lobbying for deregulation, public subsidies, and messaging centered on parental choice. These groups include organizations such as the Association of Alberta Childcare Entrepreneurs (AACE), which explicitly promotes for-profit childcare expansion as a driver of economic growth. As AACE Chair Krystal Churcher has argued, provinces require the "flexibility to roll out affordable childcare programs that align with the needs of parents and respect provincial jurisdiction" (Churcher 2024).

Manitoba, by contrast, has a very different history. Its system was built through grassroots organizing, largely led by women and feminist movements. Advocacy groups such as the Child Care Coalition of Manitoba, Child Care Now, and various unions have fought to keep childcare from becoming a profitable market. These groups frame childcare as a right and a collective responsibility (White and Prentice 2016). While Manitoba's system remains predominantly not-for-profit, it faces chronic underfunding and growing waitlists (Beach 2022).

The lack of public delivery leaves it vulnerable to creeping commercialization, especially if future governments shift priorities (Mahon 2009b).

It is also important to note that all childcare in Canada is licensed by provincial governments, regardless of auspice. Licensing establishes minimum standards related to safety, staffing, and program requirements, but it does not address deeper structural issues such as affordability or equity (Friendly et al. 2021). As a result, a licensed for-profit childcare centre may fully comply with regulatory requirements while still extracting profit and reproducing inequities through higher fees, lower wages, or uneven access (Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005; Friendly 2019). This distinction matters because provincial governments frequently point to licensing as evidence of oversight, while sidestepping the more political question of whether public funds should support private childcare businesses at all (Mahon 2009b).

By clearly exploring these three auspices, not-for-profit, public, and private childcare, we can better understand what is at stake in Canada's childcare debates. The CWELCC agreement explicitly encourages provinces to prioritize not-for-profit and public delivery, yet without strong guardrails, commercial operators are well-positioned to capture new funding streams (Friendly 2019; Government of Canada 2021b). Alberta's experience shows how quickly market logic can dominate when left unchecked. Manitoba's history demonstrates the power of advocacy and community control, but also the limits of relying on non-profit models alone (Beach 2022; Prentice 2009). Without direct public ownership, even the strongest advocacy movements cannot fully prevent privatization (Friendly 2019; Mahon 2009b).

While non-profit delivery mitigates profit extraction and is empirically associated with higher average quality outcomes than for-profit provision, it is institutionally distinct from public ownership (Doherty et al. 2000; Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005). Non-profit childcare centres

are independently incorporated entities governed by volunteer boards and reliant on operating grants and parent fees (Friendly 2019). Their financial capacity is constrained by fixed funding envelopes and limited access to capital for expansion. Publicly owned childcare, by contrast, embeds service provision directly within the state's fiscal and administrative apparatus. Governments possess taxation authority, long-term borrowing capacity, and centralized planning mechanisms that allow for coordinated expansion, wage standardization, and integration with other public services such as education and health (Banting 2020; OECD 2017).

From a political economy perspective, public ownership strengthens three dimensions central to decommodification. First, public employers operate within broader fiscal frameworks and are less constrained by market-based "ability to pay" arguments in wage negotiations, enabling more stable workforce development (Panitch and Swartz 2003). Second, more coordinated public planning can mitigate geographic inequities that arise when expansion is driven primarily by provider initiative or market demand (Friendly 2019; Friendly et al. 2021). Third, embedding childcare within public infrastructure increases the political costs of retrenchment by institutionalizing it alongside other core public services (Pierson 2004).

This argument does not suggest that non-profit delivery is ineffective; indeed, it has been foundational in provinces such as Manitoba. Rather, it contends that non-profit models remain structurally more vulnerable to fiscal drift, fragmentation, and uneven expansion than fully public systems (Hacker 2004; Friendly 2019). If the objective is to align childcare with the institutional status of public education, public ownership provides the most direct mechanism for securing long-term universality and equity.

Privatization is not a "natural" or inevitable outcome of childcare underinvestment, nor does it automatically follow from the presence of not-for-profit providers. Rather,

commercialization tends to emerge under specific political and fiscal conditions (Bakker 2007). When governments face high demand for childcare expansion but limit direct capital investment, private actors often become the most readily available vehicles for rapid growth. In contexts shaped by neoliberal governance norms—where market competition and entrepreneurial provision are treated as efficient default solutions—private expansion can appear administratively expedient, particularly during periods of fiscal restraint or austerity. Institutional legacies also matter: provinces with established commercial sectors possess embedded infrastructure, political constituencies, and lobbying networks that reinforce private delivery as the path of least resistance.

Under these conditions, underinvestment does not mechanically produce privatization, but it creates a structural opening for it. Legislation, in turn, can constrain or redirect this trajectory only if it alters the underlying funding architecture and planning framework. Absent sustained public capital investment and explicit ownership priorities, statutory commitments alone may stabilize funding without transforming the delivery model. Privatization is therefore best understood not as the automatic consequence of fiscal scarcity, but as a contingent outcome shaped by political ideology, institutional path dependency, and policy instrument choice.

Childcare may be publicly financed under a mixed delivery model, but the presence of for-profit provision introduces structural tensions with decommodification. Esping-Andersen (1990) defines decommodification as the degree to which access to essential goods is insulated from market dependence; when profit-seeking actors participate in delivery, market logics remain embedded within the system even if fees are capped or subsidized. Canadian Medicare is often cited as an example of universalism with mixed delivery, yet it remains publicly insured and tightly regulated, and private practice operates within a non-profit insurance framework

(Banting 2020). In childcare, by contrast, commercial providers directly capture operating surpluses from public transfers and parent fees, creating incentives that diverge from universal planning objectives (Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005; Friendly 2019). While non-profit provision reduces profit extraction, it does not eliminate fragmentation or fiscal vulnerability. A predominantly public model, by aligning financing, governance, and delivery under collective authority, more fully insulates childcare from market discipline and better approximates the conditions required for decommodification. The issue, therefore, is not merely whether universality can coexist with mixed delivery, but whether the continued presence of profit-oriented actors structurally constrains the realization of childcare as a social right.

Public ownership does not automatically guarantee equity or fairness. Canadian health care, while publicly financed and legislatively entrenched, continues to exhibit regional disparities, wait-time pressures, and inequities affecting Indigenous and rural populations (Banting 2020). Institutional design alone cannot eliminate distributive inequality. However, public systems possess structural features that make equity-oriented policy more feasible. Centralized financing allows cross-subsidization across regions and income groups; standardized wage grids can reduce labour market disparities; and public accountability mechanisms create clearer avenues for contestation and reform. In contrast, fragmented market-based systems distribute services according to profitability and provider initiative, which can exacerbate uneven access (Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005; Friendly 2019). The argument advanced here is therefore not that public provision guarantees fairness, but that it provides a more coherent institutional platform for pursuing equity objectives than systems organized around private accumulation.

This thesis therefore argues for a decisive shift toward public childcare as the only delivery model consistent with a rights-based, feminist vision of care. Public delivery would eliminate the ethical problem of profiting from children, reduce fragmentation, and create stable infrastructure that serves families equitably. It would also prevent the political entrenchment of commercial interests, ensuring that public funds are used to build a sustainable, universal system. Anything less risks deepening the very inequities that childcare is meant to address.

Publicly owned childcare—where government directly operates centres and employs educators—is limited in Canada but not purely theoretical. Quebec's Centres de la petite enfance (CPEs) provide the closest Canadian example of publicly planned, universally funded early learning infrastructure, though they are legally structured as non-profit corporations rather than municipal departments (Jenson 2002; Friendly 2019). In some municipalities, including Toronto, local governments directly operate childcare centres, and public-school boards in several provinces administer early years programs integrated into publicly owned facilities (Friendly et al. 2021). Internationally, more robust examples exist in Nordic countries, France, and parts of Germany, where municipal governments directly manage early childhood institutions as core public services (OECD 2017).

The relative scarcity of publicly owned childcare in Canada reflects institutional and political history rather than conceptual infeasibility. Childcare developed primarily under provincial jurisdiction through cost-shared welfare arrangements under the Canada Assistance Plan, which favoured non-profit provision rather than direct state operation (Friendly and Prentice 2009). Subsequent neoliberal reforms in the 1990s further entrenched arm's-length and market-oriented delivery models (Mahon 2009b). Unlike public education, which became constitutionally embedded and municipally administered in the nineteenth century, childcare

never achieved comparable institutional status. As a result, Canada's system evolved as a patchwork of non-profit and commercial providers, with limited public infrastructure ownership (Friendly 2019). The absence of large-scale public childcare is therefore not evidence of impracticality, but of historical path dependency and political choice.

Path Dependency and Neoliberalism

The structure of Canada's childcare systems today is not simply the result of recent political decisions. Instead, it reflects decades of historical development, during which early policy choices shaped the options available to governments and communities. This dynamic is best explained through path dependency theory, which emphasizes how initial institutional arrangements create self-reinforcing feedback loops that constrain future possibilities (Mahoney 2000; Pierson 2000). In other words, history matters. Once a particular path is taken, it becomes progressively harder to change course. In the context of childcare, this means that the decisions governments make today, whether to fund public, not-for-profit, or for-profit models, will reverberate for generations.

Path dependency operates through several mechanisms. Pierson (2000) identifies increasing returns, where the benefits of staying on the same path grow over time, and institutional lock-in, where the costs of switching to a new system become prohibitively high. For example, when governments fund for-profit childcare, private operators gain both financial resources and political legitimacy. These actors then reinvest their profits into lobbying and expansion, creating a cycle that entrenches commercialization (Friendly et al. 2021; McGinn 2023). This is evident in Alberta, where corporate chains such as *Kids & Company* and *BrightPath* are dominating the childcare sector.

The concept of path dependency helps explain why public childcare is so rare in Canada. Historically, nearly all provincial governments chose to outsource delivery to community-based non-profits rather than build public infrastructure (Prentice 2001). While this decision reflected feminist organizing and grassroots values, it also limited the state's role to funding and regulation rather than direct operation. Over time, this arrangement became normalized, making it politically and administratively challenging to argue for public ownership. Manitoba's system illustrates this dynamic: although 95 percent of licensed spaces are non-profit, the absence of public centres leaves the sector vulnerable to privatization if future governments redirect funding (Beach et al. 2023). Once for-profit operators enter the system, they quickly become powerful stakeholders, as seen in Alberta's trajectory.

Path dependency does not imply institutional immobility. As Pierson (2000) argues, policy paths become durable through increasing returns, political coalition entrenchment, and institutional investment, but they are not immutable. Change becomes possible when external shocks disrupt established equilibria, when new political coalitions gain governing authority, or when institutional arrangements are reconfigured through layering or conversion. Critical junctures—periods of heightened uncertainty and reorientation—can open space for more fundamental redirection. The durability of Alberta's commercial childcare model, for example, reflects accumulated infrastructural investment, political alignment, and stakeholder mobilization; however, sustained federal fiscal intervention under CWELCC represents an attempt to introduce new feedback mechanisms that may gradually alter the trajectory. Whether such intervention constitutes incremental adjustment or paradigm transformation depends on the depth of institutional restructuring achieved.

Policy drift complements the concept of path dependency. Whereas path dependency explains the durability of institutional arrangements through positive feedback and increasing returns, drift describes how existing policies may fail to adapt to changing social and economic conditions (Hacker 2004). In the childcare context, rising maternal labour force participation, demographic growth, and escalating operating costs intensified demand for regulated care. Where funding models and planning structures did not adjust accordingly, shortages and inequities deepened without explicit retrenchment. Drift thus represents a form of change within continuity, reinforcing path-dependent systems even in the absence of deliberate reform.

Public ownership is not immune to retrenchment. Governments with sufficient parliamentary authority can privatize public assets, contract out services, or erode program quality through fiscal constraint. Comparative scholarship on welfare state reform demonstrates that even institutionalized public systems have been partially marketized under neoliberal restructuring (Pierson 2004; Hacker 2004). The argument advanced here is therefore not that public ownership renders privatization impossible, but that it alters the political economy of retrenchment. Public infrastructure generates concentrated constituencies—public-sector workers, unions, and service users—and embeds services within the state's fiscal and administrative apparatus, thereby increasing the political and institutional costs of dismantling or restructuring them (Pierson 2000; Banting 2020). By contrast, fragmented non-profit systems lack centralized governance and unified bargaining power, making them more susceptible to incremental funding changes or policy drift (Friendly 2019; Hacker 2004). Public delivery does not eliminate risk, but it reshapes the terrain on which policy reversal occurs.

Neoliberalism and the Marketization of Care

Path dependency alone cannot explain why commercialization has accelerated in recent decades. To understand this trend, it is necessary to situate childcare within the broader political-economic context of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is not merely an economic theory but a governing rationality that prioritizes market mechanisms, individual responsibility, and the retreat of the state from direct provision of social services (Harvey 2005).

The neoliberal model frames parents as consumers navigating a marketplace of services, obscuring the structural barriers that limit real choice for many families (Simon, Penn, Shah, Owen, Lloyd, Hollingworth and Quy 2022). This framing is especially prevalent in Alberta, where parental choice is a guiding principle of childcare policy. However, as Friendly and Prentice (2009) argue, choice is meaningless without accessible, affordable options. When for-profit centres cluster in affluent neighborhoods, low-income, rural, and racialized families are left with limited or no options, reproducing systemic inequities (Friendly et al. 2021).

Neoliberalism also affects the childcare workforce, which is overwhelmingly female and undervalued. Early childhood educators (ECEs) face low wages, limited benefits, and high turnover rates. By keeping wages low, governments and private operators externalize the costs of care onto women, reinforcing gender inequality while masking the true economic and societal value of their work (Hochschild 1983).

Moreover, neoliberal policies position privatization as efficient and flexible, even when evidence shows otherwise. International research consistently finds that public and not-for-profit childcare delivers better outcomes in terms of equity, stability, and workforce retention (Friendly et al. 2021; Sosinsky, Lord and Zigler 2007).

Despite this evidence, governments have often pursued expansion through private operators because doing so can reduce immediate capital expenditures. Building publicly owned childcare centres requires substantial upfront public investment in land, facilities, and long-term operational commitments. By contrast, relying on private or community-based providers—whether for-profit or not-for-profit—can shift some capital costs onto operators, who secure financing through loans, fundraising, or retained revenues, while governments provide operating grants and fee subsidies. In this sense, expansion through non-profit organizations may still depend on public funding, but it does not necessarily require direct public ownership of infrastructure.

The distinction, therefore, is not simply between public and private provision, but between models that socialize capital investment and those that distribute capital risk across non-state actors. Where governments avoid direct infrastructure development, expansion is mediated through organizations that must assume financial and administrative responsibility for facilities, even when operating revenues are publicly subsidized (Friendly 2019; Friendly and Prentice 2009; Mahon 2009b). As Macdonald (2026) explains, Alberta "allow[ed] operational funding to go to new for-profit centres, allowing them to expand rapidly. The result will be a more costly system and likely more pressure on governments from the for-profit providers to increase their financial support to sustain profits." This logic helps explain why Alberta has relied heavily on commercial childcare chains to expand capacity, even as this approach has produced inequitable outcomes and long-term inefficiencies within the system (Friendly 2019).

Third-Order Change: Breaking the Cycle

International commitments play a limited but not insignificant role in shaping domestic childcare policy. Canada is a signatory to multiple international instruments relevant to early

childhood, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). However, these agreements are not self-executing in Canadian law; they do not automatically create enforceable entitlements unless implemented through domestic legislation. Their influence therefore operates primarily at the level of discourse, political justification, and advocacy. Governments may invoke international commitments to legitimize reform agendas, as seen in the framing of Bill C-35, while advocacy organizations draw upon these instruments to pressure policymakers and frame childcare as a rights-based obligation rather than discretionary social spending. In this sense, international commitments function less as binding legal constraints and more as normative reference points and mobilizing tools.

Their limitations are equally important. Without constitutional entrenchment or statutory incorporation, international agreements do not prevent retrenchment or guarantee uniform implementation across provinces. They cannot compel specific ownership models, wage structures, or funding levels. At most, they shape the terrain of political debate and provide interpretive guidance for courts and policymakers. For the purposes of this thesis, international commitments are therefore best understood not as independent drivers of third-order change, but as elements within a broader ideational environment that advocates and governments draw upon in contesting the meaning of childcare as a right.

Reversing decades of neoliberal commercialization will not be easy. Incremental reforms, such as expanding subsidies or introducing new regulations, represent first-order changes, which adjust existing policies without challenging underlying assumptions (Hall 1993). Even second-order changes, such as redesigning funding models, may fail to disrupt the entrenched logic of

market provision. What is needed instead is third-order change, a paradigm shift that redefines the very purpose of childcare policy (Hall 1993).

Third-order change occurs when fundamental governing ideas are transformed. In the childcare context, such change would not necessarily entail the complete elimination of private delivery—indeed, healthcare in Canada operates through a mixed model of publicly funded but privately delivered services, and public education coexists with subsidized private schools. Rather, the relevant transformation concerns decommodification. In welfare state theory, decommodification refers to the extent to which individuals can maintain a socially acceptable standard of living independent of market participation (Esping-Andersen 1990). A service is decommodified to the degree that access is secured as a social right rather than mediated by purchasing power.

Applied to childcare, decommodification would mean guaranteeing universal, affordable access irrespective of a family's income or labour market position, while structuring funding and governance so that public accountability, rather than profit maximization, determines system priorities. This does not automatically require prohibiting all non-state provision. However, it does require ensuring that market forces do not determine who receives care, under what conditions, or at what quality. The central question, therefore, is not simply whether private actors are present, but whether childcare is organized primarily as a social entitlement embedded in public responsibility, or as a consumer good subject to market allocation. It would also necessitate dismantling the political power of commercial operators, limiting their role in the system, and redirecting public funds toward universal, publicly owned infrastructure (Bakker 2007; Hall 1993).

Achieving third-order change requires more than rhetorical commitment or incremental reform. As Hall (1993) argues, paradigm shifts occur when accumulated policy failures delegitimize existing frameworks, when coherent alternative ideas are available, and when political actors are positioned to institutionalize those alternatives. In the United Kingdom, for example, the crisis of stagflation in the 1970s destabilized Keynesian orthodoxy, while monetarism—already developed within academic and policy networks—offered a ready-made alternative that could be adopted by a newly empowered Conservative government. Third-order change thus depends on the convergence of crisis, ideational readiness, and political authority.

Applied to childcare, this suggests that transformation toward decommodification would require not only social movement advocacy and political leadership, but also the perceived failure of market-oriented provision and the availability of a coherent, administratively viable public alternative. Without these conditions, reform is more likely to remain at the level of instrument adjustment rather than paradigm transformation. Feminist advocacy groups, unions, and community organizations have laid the groundwork for this shift, particularly in provinces like Manitoba where the tradition of grassroots organizing remains strong (Atkin 2001; Child Care Coalition of Manitoba 2025). However, without decisive government action, these efforts risk being undermined by the structural advantages enjoyed by for-profit providers.

While this thesis focuses primarily on legislation and intergovernmental agreements, provincial regulations also play an important role in structuring childcare systems. In both Manitoba and Alberta, enabling statutes establish the overarching legal framework for early learning and childcare, while detailed operational standards—such as staff-to-child ratios, educator qualifications, licensing requirements, and inspection regimes—are set out in regulations adopted under those statutes. These regulatory instruments shape program quality

and day-to-day administration but do not, in themselves, determine ownership structure, financing architecture, or the broader allocation of fiscal authority.

The distinction is analytically significant. Drawing on Hall's (1993) framework, regulations are more closely associated with first- and second-order change—adjustments to policy settings and instruments within an existing paradigm—whereas third-order change entails a shift in governing ideas and institutional arrangements. Regulatory amendments can improve quality standards or clarify compliance requirements, but they rarely redefine the underlying policy model. By contrast, statutory reform and fiscal design choices—particularly those embedded in legislation or intergovernmental agreements—are more likely to signal and stabilize paradigm-level change. When this thesis refers to "administrative policy," it encompasses regulations, licensing standards, and ministerial directives; however, the core analysis centers on ownership, funding design, and intergovernmental authority, as these institutional dimensions more directly shape the trajectory of commercialization or decommodification under CWELCC.

In practical terms, third-order change would involve building a network of public childcare centres, enshrining the right to care in legislation, and phasing out public subsidies to commercial operators. This is not merely an aspirational vision; it is a necessary step to ensure that future generations inherit a system grounded in equity and collective responsibility rather than market exploitation.

Linking Theory to the Case Studies

Path dependency and neoliberalism provide essential theoretical tools for analyzing Manitoba and Alberta. In Manitoba, early investments in community-based, non-profit childcare created a foundation for advocacy and equity. However, the lack of public infrastructure leaves

the system vulnerable to privatization if political winds shift. In Alberta, early decisions to fund and legitimize private operators created a self-reinforcing cycle of commercialization, amplified by neoliberal policies and corporate lobbying (Friendly 2019; Pierson 2000; Prentice 2009).

By comparing these provinces, this thesis demonstrates why preventing commercialization today is essential for securing a rights-based future. Once market logic dominates, reversing it becomes exponentially more difficult.

Methods

This research is a theoretically driven, historically inflected, comparative case study. All materials were publicly available and published before 2026. Sources include federal–provincial agreements; provincial legislation; policy frameworks; budget announcements; monitoring and evaluation reports; datasets produced by the Childcare Resource and Research Unit; publications by advocacy organizations such as Child Care Now, the Canadian Child Care Federation, and provincial coalitions; and peer-reviewed academic literature on commercialization, governance, and the care economy. Documents were selected based on relevance to three central themes: ownership and governance structures; implementation of CWELCC instruments; and discursive framing around equity, inclusion, and rights.

The analysis involved multiple close readings of each document to identify patterns, contradictions, and emergent themes. Four analytic categories guided the interpretation: (1) ownership and governance, including the roles of non-profit and for-profit providers; (2) policy instruments, such as fee caps, wage supports, capital funding, and cost-control mechanisms; (3) federal–provincial relations, focusing on how provinces negotiated and interpreted CWELCC commitments; and (4) discursive framing, including the use of concepts like choice, flexibility, partnership, inclusion, and affordability. These categories were not fixed and evolved as analysis

progressed. Concepts from feminist political economy, particularly social reproduction, commodification, and care devaluation, shaped how specific policy choices were understood within broader structural dynamics.

Reflexivity was essential throughout the research process. As a researcher with professional experience in government and academic grounding in feminist political economy, I acknowledge that my analysis is informed by normative commitments that extend beyond childcare policy itself. My support for publicly governed childcare is not rooted solely in a preference for state provision, but in a broader commitment to gender equality, equitable access to social infrastructure, and the recognition of care as a collective responsibility rather than a private burden. Public childcare, in this framework, functions as a means toward advancing substantive equality and social citizenship, particularly for women and marginalized communities. Recognizing these commitments allows me to situate my analysis transparently, while remaining attentive to alternative interpretations and institutional constraints. Drawing from feminist research traditions, I maintained awareness of positionality through analytic memo-writing, documentation of interpretive decisions, and grounding all claims in textual evidence (Harding 1987; Hesse-Biber 2014; Smith 1990). This approach enhances transparency and strengthens the integrity of the analysis.

This study also has limitations. Focusing on two provinces offers depth but limits generalizability across Canada. Document-based research cannot capture lived experiences of ECEs, parents, or children, nor can it fully assess implementation challenges occurring at the service-delivery level. Nonetheless, Manitoba and Alberta represent analytically meaningful contrasts that illuminate broader tensions within Canadian childcare policy and help illustrate how commercialization persists or is challenged within CWELCC's structure.

Because this research uses exclusively public documents, it did not require ethics approval. However, feminist ethics guided the work, including transparency in methods, respect for the communities affected by childcare policy, and recognition of the political struggles underpinning CWELCC.

Overall, combining feminist political economy, federalism, rights-based approaches, and comparative policy analysis provides a robust foundation for examining commercialization under CWELCC. These frameworks make visible the structural forces shaping childcare in Canada: gendered and racialized labour hierarchies, uneven federalism, competing policy paradigms, and the influence of commercial actors. They also illustrate how CWELCC marks a significant but incomplete effort to reimagine childcare as public infrastructure. The comparative analysis that follows demonstrates how these forces operate differently in Manitoba and Alberta, offering insight into the future trajectory of childcare reform in Canada.

MANITOBA: A NON-PROFIT SYSTEM WITHOUT PUBLIC DELIVERY

This chapter analyzes Manitoba through the four analytic categories outlined in the Methods section: (1) ownership and governance; (2) policy instruments; (3) federal–provincial relations; and (4) discursive framing. While these categories structure the analysis, additional dynamics—particularly advocacy mobilization and institutional vulnerability—emerge through the case and are interpreted within this framework. Together, these dimensions illuminate how Manitoba's non-profit model both aligns with and remains structurally distinct from a fully public system under CWELCC.

Advocacy and Political Culture: Feminist Legacies and the Politics of Public Good

Manitoba's childcare system has long been defined by the interaction between feminist advocacy and social-democratic governance. From the 1970s onward, feminist, labour, and anti-poverty movements worked to reframe childcare as a public good and a right, rather than a private service or welfare measure. This framing took root within the province's policy culture, particularly under successive NDP governments that viewed early learning and childcare as an integral part of gender equality and social development (Friendly and Prentice 2009).

Early policy gains reflected this alignment. Manitoba was among the first provinces to establish operating grants for licensed non-profit centres in the 1980s, an innovation that effectively defined childcare as a shared social responsibility. These grants provided stable, predictable funding directly to centres, enabling them to maintain affordable parent fees and retain staff (Friendly and Prentice 2009; Prentice 2005). This approach stood in contrast to "voucher" or "fee-subsidy" models favoured by market-oriented provinces, where funds flowed to parents rather than providers.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, advocacy groups like the CCCM, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE Ontario 2012), and later CCNM maintained pressure on governments to sustain this model. Their strategies combined grassroots mobilization with policy expertise, producing research reports, community consultations, and media campaigns that linked childcare access to women's economic independence, poverty reduction, and child development outcomes (Child Care Coalition of Manitoba 2025). These coalitions have also played a key role in resisting periodic attempts at market reform, framing privatization as a threat to Manitoba's feminist legacy and to the rights of women and children.

Manitoba's political culture has therefore produced a unique form of advocacy, a system where civil society organizations maintain direct relationships with policymakers and bureaucrats, shaping both agenda-setting and policy design. This cooperative dynamic contrasts sharply with the adversarial relationship between advocacy groups and governments seen in more neoliberal provinces like Alberta. Feminist political economy helps explain this phenomenon: decades of mobilization institutionalized a social reproduction paradigm within Manitoba's policymaking, normalizing the idea that childcare is part of essential social infrastructure rather than a discretionary service (Bakker 2007)

However, this collaborative model has also produced complacency risks. As the debates around Bill 47 demonstrated, Manitoba's advocacy networks remain strong but are structurally dependent on political access and government goodwill rather than legally entrenched rights. Power Resource Theory clarifies this distinction: social movements and labour coalitions exercise associational power through organization and coalition-building, but institutional power—anchored in law, statutory entitlement, and durable governance arrangements—provides more stable protection against retrenchment (Korpi 1983). Manitoba's childcare movement has accumulated substantial coalitional influence over decades, yet the absence of legislatively entrenched guarantees leaves the system vulnerable to political recalibration.

This vulnerability is particularly visible through the lens of policy drift. As Hacker (2004) argues, drift occurs when policies remain formally intact but fail to adapt to shifting external conditions, thereby undermining their original objectives. In childcare, such external shifts may include rising labour costs, inflationary pressures, workforce shortages, demographic growth, or changes in federal transfer arrangements. If operating grants are not indexed to inflation, if wage supports fail to keep pace with labour market competition, or if capital funding does not expand

alongside population growth, the system may gradually become less accessible and less equitable even without explicit retrenchment. In this sense, Manitoba's reliance on associational power rather than institutionalized rights means that maintenance of decommodification depends on continual political reinforcement. Without formal entitlement or statutory funding guarantees, changing economic and demographic conditions can erode policy effectiveness over time, producing transformation through neglect rather than overt reform.

Advocates continue to call for greater public ownership and legislative entrenchment of childcare principles, an agenda consistent with feminist and rights-based frameworks. Groups like the CCCM argue that Manitoba must move beyond defending non-profit delivery toward establishing a publicly governed, universally accessible system analogous to the Canada Health Act (Child Care Coalition of Manitoba 2025). This would formalize childcare as a public entitlement, shield it from political volatility, and fulfill Canada's obligations under CEDAW and the UNCRC.

The enduring influence of advocacy in Manitoba demonstrates that social movements are not peripheral to policy but constitutive of it. The province's childcare system is, in many ways, the institutional expression of feminist activism. Yet, without the infrastructure of public delivery or statutory protection, its survival depends on continued political alignment between government and grassroots organizers. As such, Manitoba's experience underscores a central paradox in Canada's childcare federalism: even the most progressive provincial models remain precarious without legislative and material public ownership (Prentice 2005).

Ownership and Governance

Manitoba has one of the lowest rates of for-profit childcare in Canada. As of 2021, only about five percent of its licensed childcare spaces were operated for profit (Beach 2022). The

overwhelming majority of centres function as non-profit organizations governed by volunteer boards of parents, educators, and community members. These governance structures emerged from grassroots feminist organizing in the 1970s and 1980s, when advocates sought to resist corporate expansion and to embed childcare within community-based institutions (Prentice 2005).

The non-profit model does not, on its own, remove childcare from the realm of consumer exchange. Parents still apply for spaces, compare availability, and pay fees. However, it alters the institutional logic of provision. Because non-profit centres cannot distribute surplus to shareholders or owners, revenues are reinvested into staffing, programming, and facility maintenance. Governance by community boards rather than corporate executives introduces mechanisms of public accountability, even where centres are not publicly owned. In this sense, the non-profit model constrains commodification by limiting profit extraction and embedding care within civic rather than shareholder-oriented institutions. Full collectivization of responsibility, however, depends on sustained public funding and entitlement-based access; without these, even non-profit systems retain elements of consumerism. The province's policy architecture, developed under successive New Democratic Party (NDP) governments, embedded these values decades before the formation of national movements such as the Child Care Coalition of Manitoba (CCCM) and Child Care Now (CCN) (Child Care Coalition of Manitoba 2025).

Organizations such as the CCCM, CCN, and various labour unions have been central to sustaining Manitoba's non-profit orientation. Through public education campaigns, policy research, and direct lobbying, these groups have worked to keep childcare out of the for-profit market. Their framing is explicitly feminist: childcare is understood as essential social

infrastructure that enables women's full participation in the workforce and public life (Child Care Coalition of Manitoba 2025; Friendly and Prentice 2009).

Despite its strong non-profit base, Manitoba's system faces persistent structural challenges. Demand continues to outpace supply, with long waitlists across the province. In Manitoba, access to licensed early learning and childcare remains constrained, with parent surveys reporting average waits of around 17 months for preferred spaces and three-quarters of respondents saying the province is nowhere close to universal childcare; a pattern that reflects chronic shortages and long waitlists, particularly outside major urban centres. Chronic underfunding has created a workforce crisis, contributing to high turnover and recruitment difficulties (The Canadian Child Care Federation 2022).

Crucially, Manitoba has no publicly owned or directly operated childcare centres. While all facilities are provincially licensed, delivery is almost entirely through non-profit organizations governed by community boards (Beach 2022). These centres rely heavily on provincial operating grants, wage enhancement funding, and parent fees to sustain operations. Historically, Manitoba has maintained relatively higher levels of public operating support compared to many provinces, which has contributed to lower parent fees and greater system stability (Friendly et al. 2021). However, capital development and expansion have largely depended on non-profit organizations securing financing and administrative capacity, rather than direct public infrastructure investment.

This governance structure produces both resilience and vulnerability. On the one hand, public operating funding has insulated Manitoba from the rapid commercialization seen elsewhere. On the other hand, the absence of publicly owned infrastructure means that system growth and stability remain contingent on the financial capacity and organizational durability of

community-based providers. Because funding levels and grant formulas are subject to political discretion, shifts in provincial leadership could alter expansion priorities or redistribute public dollars toward private operators without the institutional constraint of a publicly owned network. In this respect, Manitoba's model reflects partial decommodification through funding, but not full collectivization through public ownership.

The CWELCC agreement has brought historic federal investment to Manitoba, committing to reduce average parent fees to $10 per day, which has been fulfilled, and to expand the supply of licensed spaces (Statistics Canada 2023). However, Manitoba has only delivered a fraction of the promised spaces (Macdonald 2025). Manitoba's Action Plan, that stemmed from CWELCC, exclusively funds non-profit and publicly owned facilities, alongside measures to stabilize the early childhood education workforce through a wage grid and professional-development initiatives (Childcare Resource and Research Unit 2023). These commitments reflect the province's longstanding alignment with public-good principles.

Fees and Affordability

Before the implementation of CWELCC, childcare fees in Manitoba were substantially lower than in Alberta and other large metropolitan provinces, reflecting the province's long-standing reliance on regulated operating grants and non-profit delivery. According to Statistics Canada's 2020 Survey of Child Care Centres (Statistics Canada 2021), median monthly infant fees were approximately:

- $600–$650 in Winnipeg, and
- $550–$600 in smaller urban centres and rural areas.

While these fees were among the lowest in the country, they still represented a significant financial burden for many families, particularly given long waitlists and limited availability of

licensed spaces. Manitoba's relatively lower fee levels were not the product of market competition, but rather the result of direct public funding to centres and provincial fee controls, which constrained price escalation even prior to CWELCC. As Macdonald and Friendly (2020) demonstrate, jurisdictions with stronger non-profit and publicly funded childcare systems consistently exhibited lower and more stable parent fees than market-oriented systems. Manitoba's pre-CWELCC fee structure therefore illustrates how public planning moderated affordability pressures, even as access and supply constraints persisted.

Policy Instruments: Grants, Wage Grids, and Fee Controls

Manitoba's comparatively moderate fees were rooted in a funding architecture developed over several decades. Beginning in the 1970s, the province introduced operating grants to licensed centres in order to stabilize the sector and reduce reliance on full cost recovery through parent fees. These grants were later supplemented by wage enhancement programs in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which aimed to address workforce retention and reduce turnover. As a result, a significant share of centre operating revenue has historically come from provincial transfers rather than from parent payments alone (Friendly et al. 2021). While parent fees remained an important component of centre budgets, Manitoba's system distributed financial responsibility between families and the provincial treasury more evenly than market-oriented jurisdictions.

Over time, this mixed financing model contributed to relatively stable fee growth compared to provinces where expansion was driven more directly by market pricing. However, capital funding for new centres was more limited and often required non-profit organizations to secure financing or community partnerships. Thus, while operating funding helped moderate affordability pressures, expansion capacity remained constrained by the organizational and fiscal

limits of community-based providers. Manitoba's funding structure therefore combined elements of public subsidy with decentralized delivery—moderating commodification through operating grants but stopping short of full public ownership or entitlement-based access.

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Workforce compensation in Manitoba's early learning and child care sector is shaped by a longstanding system of supply-side operational funding and provincially regulated parent fees.

Since the 1970s, Manitoba has provided direct operating grants to licensed centres while also regulating parent fees. This funding model stabilizes centre revenues and allows the provincial government to coordinate workforce policies across the sector (Friendly et al. 2026).

Within this policy context, Manitoba has increasingly moved toward structured wage frameworks tied to educator qualifications and position classifications. The province's wage grid for 2025–2026 establishes target hourly wages for positions across licensed centres, including approximately $29.41 for ECE III frontline staff and $27.56 for ECE II educators. Lower wage targets apply to Child Care Assistants (CCAs) and staff in training, while leadership positions such as directors and supervisors receive higher target wages depending on centre size and credentials (Government of Manitoba 2025). The wage grid links compensation to formal training qualifications and job responsibilities, reflecting a coordinated workforce policy approach (Friendly et al. 2026).

Training requirements in Manitoba reinforce this structured workforce model. To qualify as an ECE, individuals typically complete a two-year diploma in early childhood education, while CCAs may enter the workforce with shorter training programs or workplace-based credential pathways. These distinctions between trained ECEs and CCAs are reflected in the wage levels (Friendly et al. 2026).

In addition to wage coordination, Manitoba also maintains sector-wide workforce supports. The province administers a pension plan for early childhood educators and assistants working in licensed centres, providing retirement benefits across the sector. These benefits further institutionalize workforce supports and distinguish Manitoba's approach from jurisdictions where compensation and benefits are determined primarily at the provider level (Friendly et al. 2026).

Together, these policies reflect a childcare system in which labour conditions are partially structured through provincial policy rather than determined solely by individual providers. Because centres receive operational funding and parent fees are regulated, the province has greater capacity to establish standardized compensation targets and workforce supports across the system. Manitoba's longstanding reliance on supply-side funding therefore facilitates a more coordinated approach to wage policy, benefits, and workforce development.

Discursive Framing and the Politics of "Modernization"

In 2021, the Progressive Conservative government introduced Bill 47, *The Early Learning and Child Care Amendment Act*, proposing significant changes to Manitoba's childcare legislation. Bill 47 sought to modernize the governance framework for early learning and childcare by expanding regulatory authority, revising cost-control mechanisms, and allowing new forms of provider registration. The government framed the legislation as an administrative update aligned with the federal CWELCC agreement (Government of Manitoba 2023). However, childcare advocates and feminist policy scholars interpreted it as a potential shift toward market flexibility that could weaken Manitoba's historically non-profit orientation (Manitoba Child Care Association 2024; Manitoba Federation of Labour 2021).

Bill 47 would have allowed for-profit providers to apply for public funding. While Bill 47 did not pass into law, despite it passing three readings, it shows the ability for another government to allow for-profit centres to run on public money. Debates around Bill 47 illustrate a broader tension within Manitoba's model: it is deeply community-based and non-profit yet lacks the protections of direct public ownership that could insulate it from market pressures (Manitoba Child Care Association 2024; Manitoba Federation of Labour 2021).

Organizations such as CCCM, CCNM, and the Manitoba Federation of Labour warned that the bill risked opening the door to private expansion under the guise of efficiency and modernization (Manitoba Child Care Association 2024; Manitoba Federation of Labour 2021). They argued that key provisions, such as changes to cost-control reporting and governance definitions, were written in vague terms that could enable for-profit operators to access public funds (Child Care Coalition of Manitoba 2025). Critics also pointed to the lack of consultation with sector stakeholders and Indigenous organizations, viewing the bill as emblematic of a top-down policy process inconsistent with Manitoba's community-governed tradition (Friendly et al. 2021; Manitoba Child Care Association 2024; Manitoba Federation of Labour 2021).

Manitoba advocates cautioned that Bill 47 could shift governance norms by implicitly legitimizing for-profit participation, drawing parallels to Alberta's cost-control framework, which permits commercial providers to access federal funding under CWELCC.

Public opposition was swift and well organized. Advocacy groups mobilized petitions, media campaigns, and legislative presentations emphasizing that "modernization" in childcare policy often serves as a euphemism for privatization and deregulation. Their messaging drew on feminist political economy arguments, highlighting that the introduction of profit motives into care systems inevitably undermines equity, quality, and workforce stability (Bakker 2007).

Following the October 2023 election of the Manitoba NDP government, Bill 47 was not repealed or withdrawn, but it was not proclaimed and therefore did not come into force. Subsequent childcare reforms have instead been pursued through CWELCC action plans, funding agreements, and administrative policy changes rather than through activation of the legislative framework introduced under the previous government (Child Care Coalition of Manitoba 2025). This period nonetheless revealed the fragility of Manitoba's policy architecture:

despite decades of advocacy and a strong non-profit base, the governance framework for early learning and childcare remains vulnerable to political turnover and ideological shifts.

Bill 47 thus serves as a cautionary episode in Manitoba's childcare history. It illustrates how quickly provincial direction can pivot when the structural foundations of public delivery are absent. While Manitoba avoided the legislative entrenchment of commercialization, the debates surrounding Bill 47 underscore the need for statutory protections that codify non-profit and public-first principles. Embedding these commitments in law, rather than relying on administrative policy, would help insulate Manitoba's childcare system from future market incursions and ensure the durability of its feminist and rights-based foundations.

Manitoba thus stands at a policy crossroads. Its institutional legacy, advocacy infrastructure, and provincial-federal alignment position it to advance a genuinely public, rights-based childcare system. Yet the absence of public delivery, coupled with workforce uncertainty and potential legislative drift, exposes it to the same commercialization pressures evident elsewhere in Canada. Whether Manitoba consolidates its non-profit foundation into a publicly governed system or allows incremental privatization to take root will test the province's commitment to the feminist and social-democratic principles that built its childcare system.

Federal–Provincial Relations under CWELCC

Manitoba's CWELCC Action Plan builds upon its existing non-profit infrastructure and reflects the province's long-standing emphasis on equity and affordability. Under the agreement, Manitoba committed to reducing average parent fees to $10 per day by 2026, expanding licensed capacity by more than 23,000 new spaces, and investing in workforce recruitment and retention (Childcare Resource and Research Unit 2023; Statistics Canada 2023). The province met its first

major affordability milestone early, reaching the $10-per-day average by April 2023, one of the first jurisdictions in Canada to do so (Government of Manitoba 2023).

Manitoba's expansion strategy prioritizes non-profit facilities, in keeping with the federal guideline that new growth occurs primarily outside the commercial sector. Provincial funding supports new non-profit developments through capital grants, operating subsidies, and streamlined licensing processes for community-based providers. Unlike market-oriented provinces, Manitoba has not introduced incentives for private operators to expand, reinforcing its ideological alignment with a public-good model (Childcare Resource and Research Unit 2023).

In Manitoba, the initial outcomes of CWELCC implementation demonstrate both the achievements and limits of the province's existing childcare infrastructure. McCracken and Prentice (2025) note that more than 39,000 children in Manitoba now benefit from $10-a-day childcare, reflecting the rapid reduction in fees facilitated by federal investments and provincial participation. At the same time, only about 20 percent of children aged 0–12 have access to a licensed childcare program, underscoring persistent gaps in capacity even after fee reductions. These data illustrate that affordability gains can be realized relatively quickly with conditional federal funding, but that expanding supply and access remains a central challenge, particularly within a system that continues to rely predominantly on non-profit and parent-led centres with limited capacity growth infrastructure.

McCracken and Prentice (2025) also frame the expansion of public roles in delivery and planning as a mechanism to accelerate both social and economic gains. They argue that a stronger public presence, including school boards, municipal governments, and Indigenous governing bodies, could play a pivotal role in planning, funding, and delivering early learning and childcare services, much as these public bodies have done in other social sectors. For

example, school divisions in other provinces directly operate childcare programs, ensuring space creation and workforce employment under public governance. In Manitoba, while over 94 percent of existing centres are non-profit independent businesses, the authors suggest that public entities could help address childcare deserts and uneven access by assuming direct responsibility for new space creation and coordination with existing services.

The province has also established a wage grid for ECEs as part of its workforce strategy, which is designed to address wage stagnation and professionalize the sector. The grid links compensation to qualification levels, years of experience, and position type, providing a floor for wages across the province (Government of Manitoba 2023). While this policy represents a significant step toward stabilizing the workforce, advocates note that implementation remains uneven and that wage levels still fall short of a living wage in many communities (The Canadian Child Care Federation 2022).

Manitoba's commitments also include targeted investments in inclusion and Indigenous-led programs, developed in partnership with the Manitoba Métis Federation and First Nations communities. These initiatives aim to ensure culturally responsive care and to address historical underfunding of Indigenous early learning (Government of Canada 2023).

Despite these commitments, Manitoba's reliance on non-profits, rather than direct public provision, continues to limit system coherence and scale. Expansion depends on the capacity of individual organizations to secure capital, recruit staff, and navigate regulatory processes. Without sustained public investment in infrastructure or a clear pathway to public ownership, the province's achievements in affordability and non-profit protection remain vulnerable to fiscal constraint and political change.

Implications: Manitoba's Non-Profit Pathway and Its Structural Limits

Manitoba represents a strong non-profit-oriented model of childcare governance. Its system demonstrates how decades of feminist advocacy, community governance, and social-democratic policymaking can entrench a rights-based approach within provincial structures. With 94 percent of licensed spaces operated on a non-profit basis, Manitoba exemplifies what feminist political economy calls a decommodified care model, one that resists profit extraction and centres collective responsibility for social reproduction (Bakker 2007; Friendly et al. 2021).

Yet this model also exposes the limits of decommodification within a federation still structured by fiscal constraint and political contingency. Manitoba's reliance on non-profit rather than public delivery means that care remains dependent on community capacity and provincial funding priorities. Without government-owned infrastructure or statutory guarantees, the system's foundations are vulnerable to ideological turnover, illustrated by the brief but revealing episode of Bill 47. The bill's introduction, and the rapid mobilization it provoked, highlighted both the strength of Manitoba's advocacy networks and the fragility of the institutional protections underpinning them.

Public ownership and legal entrenchment do not make policy immune to retrenchment—comparative experience demonstrates that publicly owned assets can be privatized and statutory protections revised under shifting political and fiscal pressures. However, institutionalization alters the terrain of contestation. Where services are embedded in public infrastructure or protected through legislative entitlement, reversal typically requires explicit policy change and carries higher political and administrative costs. In contrast, systems dependent primarily on operating grants and informal norms are more susceptible to recalibration through incremental funding adjustments, regulatory reinterpretation, or policy drift. The absence of publicly owned

infrastructure therefore does not predetermine retrenchment, but it lowers the threshold at which ideological change can reshape system design.

From a feminist political economy perspective, this tension reflects the broader contradiction of CWELCC's implementation: federal investments are channelled through provincial systems that vary in ownership structure and political orientation. Manitoba's alignment with CWELCC's non-profit-first principles demonstrates that transformation is possible within the existing constitutional framework. However, without public ownership, decommodification remains partial, it is dependent on the goodwill of provincial governments and the resilience of grassroots organizers.

From the standpoint of federalism and path dependency, Manitoba illustrates how early institutional choices create durable policy trajectories. The operating-grant system of the 1980s established a feedback loop that continues to privilege non-profit providers and discourage commercialization. This path-dependent structure explains why Manitoba was able to integrate CWELCC with relative ease: the federal goals of affordability, workforce support, and non-profit expansion aligned with its long-standing policy logic (Pierson 2000). At the same time, this very stability can hinder innovation, particularly in addressing rural and Indigenous childcare needs or in transitioning toward publicly owned models.

Finally, Manitoba's case reveals the persistent gap between rights discourse and policy practice. The province's childcare framework embodies the spirit of international commitments such as CEDAW and the UNCRC, but these rights are not legislated or enforceable. As a result, they remain politically reversible. Feminist scholars argue that achieving true third-order change (Hall 1993), a paradigmatic shift from market facilitation to public entitlement, requires embedding childcare as a statutory right. Manitoba's experience demonstrates both how close

Canada can come to this transformation and how incomplete it remains when public delivery is absent.

Despite Manitoba's long-standing commitment to non-profit childcare provision, overall access has remained largely stagnant in recent years. Prior to the introduction of CWELCC, licensed childcare spaces in Manitoba covered approximately 25 percent of children in 2019. By 2024, coverage had increased only marginally, reaching about 28 percent, representing a change of just three percentage points over five years. This limited growth suggests that while policy alignment with non-profit delivery and affordability objectives is necessary, it has not been sufficient on its own to substantially expand access.

Several structural constraints help explain why non-profit expansion has lagged behind policy ambition. First, capital costs present a significant barrier. Non-profit organizations generally lack access to equity financing and must rely on grants, debt, or community fundraising to secure facilities; limited provincial capital funding and rising real estate costs have constrained expansion capacity (Friendly et al. 2021; Macdonald and Friendly 2020). Second, workforce shortages restrict growth even where operating funding is available. Research consistently documents recruitment and retention challenges driven by historically low wages, credential requirements, and competition from other sectors (Doherty et al. 2000; Friendly 2019; Beach et al. 2023). Third, governance capacity presents an additional constraint. Most non-profit centres are governed by volunteer boards of directors, whose administrative and financial capacity varies and who may be cautious about assuming debt or scaling operations rapidly (Friendly 2019; Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005). Together, these factors suggest that alignment with non-profit delivery is insufficient without sustained capital investment, workforce strategy, and institutional supports for organizational scaling.

In sum, Manitoba's childcare system occupies a paradoxical position within Canada's policy landscape: it is structurally progressive but materially fragile. It stands as proof that non-profit provision can deliver equity and affordability when supported by robust advocacy and state partnership. Yet its vulnerabilities highlight the central argument of this thesis: that without public delivery, even the most community-based systems remain susceptible to commercialization and political reversal. Across the four analytic dimensions, Manitoba demonstrates strong alignment with CWELCC's non-profit-first orientation but reveals structural limits in ownership and institutional entrenchment. Ownership remains decentralized and community-based rather than publicly integrated; policy instruments emphasize operating grants and fee control but rely on administrative discretion; federal–provincial relations have been cooperative; and discursive framing reflects a durable feminist public-good paradigm. However, the absence of public delivery and statutory protection introduces vulnerability to drift and political recalibration. These findings suggest that Manitoba embodies partial decommodification—robust in funding orientation, but incomplete in institutional structure.

ALBERTA CASE STUDY: COMMERCIALIZATION, POLITICAL POWER, AND THE MARKET LOGIC OF CHILDCARE UNDER CWELCC

Alberta is analyzed through the four analytic categories outlined in the Methods section: (1) ownership and governance; (2) policy instruments; (3) federal–provincial relations; and (4) discursive framing. These categories structure the case narrative and the assessment of CWELCC implementation. While the chapter follows Alberta's historical trajectory, it also shows how these dimensions operate together to reproduce a market-first childcare model, and how new dynamics—especially corporate concentration and organized commercial advocacy—emerge as mechanisms that intensify path dependency within the four-category framework.

Alberta represents the most commercialized childcare system in Canada, shaped by a long-standing political culture that views childcare as a private market service rather than a public entitlement. In contrast to Manitoba, whose childcare system evolved through feminist organizing, community governance, and sustained operational funding, Alberta's system developed through fee-subsidy models, deregulation, and policies explicitly designed to encourage private-sector expansion. As a result, Alberta entered the CWELCC agreement with the highest proportion of for-profit childcare spaces in Canada, with approximately 66 percent of licensed spaces operated on a for-profit basis, compared to a national average of roughly one-third (Beach et al. 2023; Friendly 2019). This ownership structure has been reinforced by a well-organized commercial childcare sector, including large corporate chains and industry associations that have actively lobbied provincial and federal governments to preserve market flexibility under CWELCC.

This chapter traces Alberta's historical trajectory, its distinctive market-oriented childcare architecture, and its path-dependent resistance to CWELCC's decommodification objectives. Drawing on feminist political economy, federalism, and path-dependency theory, the chapter demonstrates how Alberta's commercial childcare model is both a product and a driver of neoliberal governance, reflecting decades of policy choices that prioritize individual "parental choice," deregulated markets, and the interests of private childcare entrepreneurs over children's rights and workforce stability.

Historical Development of Childcare in Alberta

Childcare in Alberta initially developed not as an educational entitlement or universal social right, but as a residual social service situated within family and social services administration. Provincial documents in the 1970s and 1980s framed childcare primarily as

support for families deemed in need, and fee subsidies were directed toward low-income parents (Friendly and Prentice 2009). While Alberta did provide direct operating and maintenance grants to centres during the 1980s—amounting to approximately $257 per month per infant space and $65 per month for five-year-olds in 1986 (Cleveland 2022)—these supports were limited relative to full cost recovery and did not signal a shift toward universal, publicly planned provision. Rather than building publicly owned infrastructure or embedding childcare as an entitlement, the province maintained a model in which service delivery was largely market-based and expansion depended on private and community operators. The more pronounced shift toward fee-subsidy reliance and fiscal restraint emerged in the mid-1990s under the Klein government, when operating supports were restructured and market mechanisms became more central to system growth.

In contrast to provinces that built robust non-profit systems through operational grants, such as Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Quebec, Alberta relied on a market-mediated approach in which public funds flowed to parents rather than to providers. Feminist scholars argue that such subsidy-driven models enable private entrepreneurs to establish centres wherever demand is profitable, rather than according to population need (Mahon 2009c). Alberta chose this model early, embedding market logic into the province's foundational childcare architecture.

During this period, feminist advocacy networks were far less influential in Alberta than in Manitoba or Quebec. Alberta's women's organizations focused largely on employment equity, violence prevention, and reproductive rights, with significantly less mobilization around childcare. This absence restricted the formation of strong non-profit advocacy coalitions, which elsewhere had pressured governments to view childcare as essential social infrastructure.

Without sustained public advocacy, Alberta defaulted to a laissez-faire model that normalized private provision.

A decisive turning point came with the election of Premier Ralph Klein in 1993. Klein's government implemented sweeping austerity measures, reduced public spending, and advanced a hardline neoliberal agenda known as the "Alberta Advantage." As Mahon (2009c) notes, Alberta in the 1990s became a national exemplar of neoliberal restructuring, characterized by privatization, low taxes, deregulation, and the retreat of the state from social programs. Childcare was directly affected. During the Klein era, provincial policy shifted away from sustained operating support toward a greater reliance on fee subsidies and market-based expansion. While aggregate spending on childcare and family services did not necessarily decline in absolute terms, the composition of funding changed. Direct operating and maintenance grants were reduced or restructured, and greater emphasis was placed on subsidizing eligible families rather than stabilizing centre-level funding (Friendly and Prentice 2009; Cleveland 2022). As a result, growth in licensed capacity depended increasingly on private providers responding to market incentives rather than on coordinated public planning. This funding architecture did not eliminate public expenditure, but it funneled support through market-mediated channels, with distributive consequences shaped by price levels, eligibility thresholds, and geographic demand. This policy direction accelerated the growth of for-profit childcare providers, who faced few barriers to entry and enjoyed a stable market due to increased women's labour-force participation. By refusing to introduce direct operational grants, an instrument shown to stabilize wages and quality (Friendly and Prentice 2009), the Klein government ensured that childcare remained firmly situated within the market rather than the public sphere.

During this period, for-profit childcare chains began to expand significantly. Edleun (later BrightPath) was founded in Calgary in 2010 but grew out of earlier corporate developments that took root during the Klein era. Kids & Company also expanded its footprint in Alberta, benefiting from the province's permissive regulatory context. Unlike Manitoba, which introduced wage enhancement grants and structured training supports to professionalize the childcare workforce beginning in the late 1990s, Alberta did not institutionalize comparable province-wide wage-setting mechanisms, leaving compensation largely to individual operators (Friendly 2019; Cleveland 2022). While Alberta experienced notable wage growth between 1991 and 2015—eventually reaching slightly higher average wage levels than Manitoba (Cleveland 2022, 18)—this growth occurred largely through market-driven adjustment rather than through a coordinated provincial wage policy. Manitoba's model emphasized stabilization and predictability through public wage supplements, whereas Alberta relied more heavily on operator-level decisions shaped by local labour market conditions. The divergence therefore lies less in absolute wage outcomes at a single point in time than in the institutional mechanisms through which wages were structured and sustained.

Ownership and Governance: Commercial Auspice and Sector Structure

These early policy decisions created conditions for strong path dependency. Pierson (2000) argues that policy trajectories become locked in when initial institutional choices generate self-reinforcing feedback effects. Alberta's reliance on fee subsidies rather than operating grants produced precisely such effects: it empowered private operators, weakened the non-profit sector, and normalized commercial provision as the default mode of childcare. Over time, the workforce adapted to a low-wage, low-regulation environment; parents grew accustomed to navigating childcare as a market; and governments increasingly viewed the private sector as indispensable.

By the early 2000s, Alberta had one of the smallest non-profit childcare sectors in Canada, with approximately 35–40 percent of licensed childcare spaces operated by non-profit providers, compared to a national average of roughly 70 percent non-profit provision at the time (Friendly et al. 2003; Friendly 2019). Without a strong non-profit infrastructure, alternative models faced scaling constraints, and private providers became central to system expansion. This structural composition shaped Alberta's approach to CWELCC. In its 2021 Action Plan and bilateral agreement with the federal government, Alberta emphasized that existing licensed providers—including for-profit operators—would play a key role in expanding capacity (Government of Alberta 2021; Government of Canada 2021c). Provincial officials later reiterated that limiting expansion to non-profit providers would constrain space creation in a system where commercial operators constitute a substantial share of existing capacity (Government of Alberta 2023). Alberta's defence of for-profit participation thus reflects not only ideological preference, but institutional path dependency rooted in sector composition.

Market Share and Corporate Concentration

By 2021, Alberta had the highest proportion of for-profit childcare spaces in Canada. On the eve of CWELCC implementation, approximately two-thirds (about 66 percent) of Alberta's licensed childcare spaces were operated by for-profit providers, compared with about 5 percent in Manitoba and roughly one-quarter nationally (Beach et al. 2023). CRRU data further show that for-profit operators already comprised 59 percent of Alberta's total spaces in 2019, prior to CWELCC, underscoring the province's long-standing reliance on commercial provision. Alberta was also home to some of Canada's earliest childcare corporations. BrightPath Early Learning, formerly Edleun, became the first publicly traded childcare corporation in Canada, listed on the TSX before being purchased by the U.K.-based multinational Busy Bees in 2017. Kids &

Company, a rapidly expanding corporate chain with over 130 centres nationwide, also established a significant presence in Alberta (Beach et al. 2023; Friendly 2019).

Although BrightPath and Kids & Company do not constitute a majority of Alberta's total licensed childcare spaces, they represent a significant share of the province's commercial segment and are among its largest multi-site operators (Friendly 2019; CRRU 2023). As of 2019, approximately 59 percent of Alberta's licensed spaces were operated for profit (CRRU 2023), meaning that large chains operate within a delivery model already dominated by commercial provision. Corporate disclosures indicate that BrightPath (owned by Busy Bees) and Kids & Company together operate dozens of centres in Alberta's major urban markets, particularly Calgary and Edmonton (Busy Bees 2017; Kids & Company n.d. a). While provincial concentration ratios remain below monopoly levels, scale confers advantages in access to capital, administrative coordination, and policy advocacy. Market influence in Alberta's childcare sector therefore derives not solely from aggregate share, but from the organizational capacity and strategic positioning of large corporate providers within an already commercialized system.

These chains hold substantial political and economic power. They benefit from economies of scale, centralized administrative systems, and the ability to leverage real estate assets. Unlike community-based non-profit centres, which reinvest surpluses into staffing and programming, corporate chains often engage in profit-maximizing practices such as standardizing programming, outsourcing food services, and minimizing labour costs (Friendly 2019). Alberta's permissive market environment made it fertile ground for the expansion of such firms.

Policy Instruments: Fee Subsidies, Fee Caps, Cost-Control, and Workforce Supports

Alberta's policy architecture relies heavily on instruments that mediate access through markets—particularly parent-directed subsidies and affordability measures—while maintaining comparatively weaker centre-level wage-setting and public planning tools than provinces oriented toward decommodification.

Fees and Affordability

Before the implementation of CWELCC, Alberta families faced some of the highest childcare fees in the country. Statistics Canada's 2020 *Survey of Child Care Centres* reported median monthly infant fees of:

- $1,300–$1,400 in Calgary, and
- $1,200–$1,350 in Edmonton.

These rates were on par with major metropolitan centres like Toronto and Vancouver, reflecting the degree to which market forces — not public planning — determined pricing. A study by Macdonald and Friendly (2020) found that for-profit centres typically charged higher fees than non-profit providers, a pattern consistent across Canadian cities. These findings correspond to international evidence showing that commercial childcare tends to be more expensive due to the extraction of profits and the need to cover leasing or debt-financing costs.

Workforce Conditions: Wages, Turnover, and Qualifications

Alberta's childcare workforce has long experienced low wages, high turnover, and limited professional supports. According to CRRU (2021), the average wage for ECEs in Alberta before CWELCC ranged between $17 and $19 per hour, substantially below living wage benchmarks in major cities. Wage differences between for-profit and non-profit centres averaged

12–20 percent nationwide (Doherty et al. 2000), a gap reflected in Alberta's overwhelmingly commercial system.

High turnover rates destabilized children's relationships with caregivers and reduced program quality. As Cleveland and Krashinsky (2005) argue, the most significant determinants of childcare quality are the training, stability, and working conditions of educators, areas where for-profit centres consistently underperform. In Alberta, these dynamics were compounded by comparatively low training requirements for early childhood educators: prior to CWELCC, Level 2 certification could be obtained through a one-year post-secondary credential, while Level 1 required only short-term coursework. This minimal credentialing framework, combined with low wages and limited benefits in the commercial sector, contributed to high staff turnover and constrained pedagogical quality (Government of Alberta 2021). Alberta's heavy reliance on for-profit provision thus produced systemic challenges in maintaining quality standards, as credentialed educators frequently exited the sector for better-paid work, further intensifying staffing shortages and undermining continuity of care.

In contrast to Manitoba, workforce compensation in Alberta's early learning and child care sector has historically developed within a more market-oriented funding environment. Alberta has not traditionally relied on supply-side operational funding as the primary mechanism for supporting childcare services. Instead, childcare provision has been more heavily financed through parent fees and market participation, with government funding playing a more limited role in structuring provider revenues. Parent fees have also historically remained unregulated at the provincial level (Friendly et al. 2026).

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In Alberta, wages for early childhood educators are generally determined by individual employers rather than through a provincially coordinated wage grid. Centres establish their own compensation levels based on local labour market conditions, operating costs, and revenue generated through parent fees. Government programs supplement wages through targeted funding mechanisms such as educator wage enhancements and top-ups designed to address recruitment and retention challenges within the workforce. However, these supplements function

as additional funding layered onto employer-determined wages rather than establishing standardized compensation across the sector (Friendly et al. 2026).

Differences in training requirements also shape wage structures in Alberta. The province classifies educators across three certification levels, with Level 1 certification requiring approximately one year of postsecondary training. This differs from Manitoba's approach, where qualification as an ECE typically requires completion of a two-year diploma program. As a result, the educational thresholds associated with ECE classification differ between Manitoba and Alberta complicating direct comparisons of wage levels across jurisdictions (Friendly et al. 2026).

In addition, Alberta does not maintain a province-wide pension plan or standardized benefits system for early childhood educators comparable to Manitoba's sector-wide pension framework. Compensation and benefits are therefore largely determined at the level of individual providers, contributing to greater variability in employment conditions across centres (Friendly et al. 2026).

Childcare Deserts

Research consistently shows that market-led childcare systems produce spatial inequities, with licensed spaces clustering in higher-income neighbourhoods where higher fees are sustainable, while lower-income and rural communities experience chronic shortages. In Alberta, this pattern has contributed to the concentration of childcare deserts in lower-income urban neighbourhoods and non-urban regions, reflecting the tendency of for-profit providers to follow profitability rather than population need (Friendly 2019). This pattern reflects a fundamental tension between market provision and equitable access. As Friendly (2019) argues, childcare delivered through markets expands where profitability is highest, not where population need is

greatest. Alberta exemplified this phenomenon: childcare supply was strongly correlated with affluence, leaving marginalized communities underserved.

Corporate expansion criteria further illuminate the spatial logic of market-led childcare growth. In publicly available materials directed at potential sellers, Kids & Company states:

> "We grow both by acquisition and new build. When we look at an acquisition, we consider child care providers that have a solid reputation in their community, a decent facility and some formal accounting to show their enrolment numbers, cash flow and income over previous periods. We tend to focus on locations in urban areas that serve an engaged community without excessive competition" (Kids & Company n.d.a).

This language highlights financial performance, revenue stability, and competitive positioning as key determinants of expansion. While such criteria are commercially rational, they prioritize market viability over distributive equity. Communities with weaker enrollment histories, lower household income, or greater perceived competition may be less attractive acquisition targets, reinforcing uneven spatial development within a market-oriented system.

The vulnerabilities inherent in Alberta's commercial childcare system became starkly visible in September 2023, when a major E. coli outbreak in Calgary sickened more than 350 children and led to dozens of hospitalizations. The outbreak was traced to a privately operated central kitchen that supplied meals to multiple for-profit childcare centres. Investigations revealed issues related to food handling, regulatory oversight, and risk management within a commercial model designed to minimize costs (Sherif 2023). While no single outbreak defines an entire system, the scale of this event highlighted structural risks: corporate consolidation of services, outsourcing, and reliance on cost-cutting strategies that prioritize efficiency over child well-being.

Langford's (2001) historical analysis also shows how Alberta governments have long been receptive to commercial childcare interests, dating back to the 1990s when early corporate chains first emerged in the province. This political openness to private actors created fertile ground for the contemporary influence of groups like the Association of Alberta Childcare Entrepreneurs (AACE) and multinational providers such as BrightPath.

Commercial childcare interests occupy a uniquely influential position in Alberta's policy landscape. Nowhere else in Canada has the for-profit childcare sector developed such a cohesive political identity or exerted comparable pressure on provincial decision-making. At the center of this influence is the AACE, which advocates on behalf of small, medium, and large commercial operators, including major corporate chains such as BrightPath, Kids & Company, Global Avenues, and Kids U. AACE's communication strategy is explicitly political: it organizes operators, mobilizes parents, and engages directly with government through consultations, briefing notes, and public advocacy.

AACE's messaging consistently aligns with neoliberal frames emphasizing *parental choice*, *flexibility*, *innovation*, and *efficiency*. These discursive strategies mirror earlier neoliberal social-policy transformations described by Mahon (2009a), in which care becomes conceptualized as a consumer good rather than a collective responsibility. AACE frequently argues that excluding for-profit providers from public funding would reduce capacity, limit parental choice, and suppress innovation, claims that are at odds with evidence demonstrating that for-profit providers systematically cluster in high-income areas, depress wages, and deliver lower average quality (Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005).

On its "At What Cost?" campaign website, AACE argues that the federal childcare agreement "puts Alberta's diverse child care sector at risk by limiting flexibility and imposing a

one-size-fits-all approach" (Association of Alberta Childcare Entrepreneurs n.d.). The emphasis on flexibility and diversity of business models frames regulatory standardization as a threat to market pluralism rather than as a mechanism of public planning.

Alberta-based commercial providers have also sought to expand their advocacy beyond the provincial level. In February 2024, the Association of Alberta Childcare Entrepreneurs announced the formation of a National Committee on Childcare Reform, described as a coalition of childcare operators from across Canada responding to the implementation of CWELCC (Association of Alberta Childcare Entrepreneurs 2024). The initiative framed the federal framework as constraining "parental choice" and limiting the participation of private operators and positioned the committee as a vehicle to advocate for greater flexibility and inclusion of for-profit providers nationwide. The move signals an effort to scale commercial advocacy power beyond Alberta and to contest the federal government's prioritization of not-for-profit and public expansion.

The influence of AACE extends beyond rhetoric. Alberta government communications routinely adopt language identical to that of commercial stakeholders, such as references to the importance of "choice in a mixed-market system" and warnings that restrictions on for-profit operators would "limit growth." Policy announcements from the Government of Alberta regularly include statements praising the "entrepreneurial spirit" of childcare owners and framing them as essential partners (Government of Alberta 2021; Government of Alberta 2023; McGinn 2023; Friendly, Vickerson, and Mohamed 2021). This ideological echo demonstrates the extent to which commercial childcare operators have shaped provincial understandings of childcare's purpose and governance.

Corporate chains also play a significant lobbying role. BrightPath, Alberta's largest childcare corporation and part of a multinational conglomerate owned by Busy Bees, has actively engaged in policy discussions around CWELCC. Kids & Company, another large chain with centres across Alberta, regularly participates in public policy dialogues, positioning itself as a solution to childcare shortages while downplaying issues related to profit extraction and wage suppression. These corporate actors possess considerable resources, including legal expertise, communications teams, and executive networks. Their influence is well-documented in analyses of corporate childcare globally (Penn 2012), and Alberta provides a clear example of how multinational firms can reshape policy to align with commercial interests.

The combined advocacy power of AACE and childcare corporations has positioned Alberta's policy values, one that privileges business interests over the rights of children, the workforce, and communities. Their lobbying reinforces a provincial political culture steeped in neoliberal norms, making publicly oriented reforms more difficult to implement. This political-economic environment forms the backdrop against which Alberta negotiated its CWELCC agreement.

Federal–Provincial Relations: Negotiating Flexibility within CWELCC

Alberta's CWELCC implementation highlights how provincial autonomy mediates national reform. The province negotiated and interpreted federal commitments through the lens of its existing sector composition and political priorities, securing implementation terms that preserved the participation of for-profit operators.

Alberta Under CWELCC: Negotiation, Divergence, and Continued Market Orientation

When the federal government introduced CWELCC in 2021, Alberta approached negotiations with notable resistance. The federal framework emphasized affordability, workforce

supports, and a non-profit expansion principle, which directs public capital toward creating new non-profit and public childcare spaces. Alberta, however, insisted that excluding commercial providers from capital funding would artificially limit growth in a province where the majority of existing spaces were for-profit (Government of Canada 2021c). This argument reflected both provincial ideology and the lobbying efforts of commercial stakeholders.

After months of negotiation, Alberta signed its bilateral agreement in November 2021, but only after securing terms far more favourable to commercial operators than those obtained by other provinces. Most significantly, Alberta negotiated a clause allowing for-profit operators to access federal expansion funds, despite the federal government's stated intention to prioritize non-profit growth (Government of Alberta 2023). Alberta justified this exception by arguing that its childcare landscape was uniquely dependent on commercial capacity.

The province's subsequent Cost Control Framework further illustrates its divergence from federal principles. Introduced in 2023, the framework requires for-profit centres to provide cost-breakdown reports and adhere to certain limits on fee increases in exchange for receiving CWELCC funds. However, unlike cost-control measures in provinces such as Manitoba, Nova Scotia, or Prince Edward Island, Alberta's framework permits:

- profit-taking on publicly funded operations,
- management fees paid to parent companies,
- leasing arrangements with related corporations,
- and continued corporate expansion using federal funds.

Evidence from early CWELCC implementation suggests that cost-control mechanisms alone are insufficient to prevent commercialization. In his assessment of new space creation, Macdonald (2025:5) states, "Since 2022, 57 per cent of all the net new licensed childcare spaces

for non-school age children have been for-profit spaces… This hasn't been a Canada-wide public expansion of childcare — it has been an overwhelmingly for-profit expansion."

Fee reductions under CWELCC did reduce out-of-pocket costs for parents by an average of 50 percent by 2023, bringing median fees closer to those in other provinces (Statistics Canada 2022). However, affordability gains were accompanied by implementation problems. Many commercial centres reported difficulty with cost-control paperwork, and the province struggled with administrative backlogs that delayed payments to providers. In some cases, operators publicly threatened to withdraw from CWELCC if regulations tightened, demonstrating the risky relationship between government and the for-profit sector.

Workforce challenges remain deeply entrenched. Alberta introduced wage top-ups in 2022 and 2023, but these were modest, voluntary, and administered at the centre level. Without a binding provincial wage grid, ECE wages continue to vary widely among centres, and the systemic undervaluation of the workforce persists (Doherty et al. 2000). Provincial workforce shortages remain severe: Alberta reported vacancy rates among certified ECEs above 20 percent in 2023, one of the highest in the country (Government of Alberta 2023; Statistics Canada 2023).

Workforce challenges remain deeply entrenched. Although CWELCC bilateral agreements require provinces to articulate workforce strategies, federal funding is not contingent on the implementation of a standardized wage grid (Government of Canada and Government of Manitoba 2021). Manitoba has long relied on wage enhancement grants tied to classification levels and provincial operating funding, and its CWELCC Action Plan reiterates commitments to workforce stabilization and wage supports (Government of Manitoba 2021). Alberta, by contrast, introduced centre-administered wage top-ups without establishing a binding provincial wage

grid. As a result, wages in Alberta continue to vary widely across operators, reflecting a more decentralized and market-mediated approach to workforce regulation.

The province's emphasis on "choice," its permissive framework for commercial operators, and its limited workforce strategy all indicate that CWELCC has not prompted a paradigm shift in Alberta. Instead, the province has adapted federal requirements into a framework that maintains the commercial status quo.

Discursive Framing: "Choice," "Flexibility," and Market Legitimacy

Alberta's commercial model is reinforced not only through institutional design but through discourse. Government and industry messaging repeatedly frames childcare as a service market—emphasizing parental choice, provider flexibility, and partnership—thereby legitimizing for-profit participation and narrowing the perceived scope of public alternatives.

Alberta's Trajectory Through Path Dependency

Path dependency provides a powerful analytic framework for understanding Alberta's resistance to decommodification under CWELCC. Alberta's childcare system exhibits all the hallmarks of a path-dependent institution as outlined by Pierson (2000): initial policy choices created powerful self-reinforcing feedback loops, and reversing them now carries high economic, political, and administrative costs.

The roots of Alberta's policy trajectory lie not in the complete absence of operational funding, but in a gradual recalibration of funding architecture. While Alberta provided maintenance and operating grants during the 1980s (Cleveland 2022), the more decisive shift toward reliance on fee subsidies occurred in the mid-1990s under Premier Ralph Klein's fiscal restructuring agenda. As part of broader deficit-reduction measures, childcare operating supports were reduced or restructured, and greater emphasis was placed on subsidizing eligible parents

rather than stabilizing centre-level funding (Friendly and Prentice 2009; Cleveland 2022). Expansion thereafter depended more heavily on private and community operators responding to market demand than on coordinated public planning. This restructuring entrenched a delivery model in which commercial provision became structurally central rather than supplementary. This decision empowered private providers by ensuring that public funds entered the sector through parental purchasing power rather than through direct public investment in community-based centres. Over time, private providers became the dominant organizational form, and their success created the expectation, among families and governments alike, that the private sector was the natural site of childcare delivery (Friendly 2022; Prentice 2009).

Feedback loops subsequently entrenched the commercial model. As private operators expanded, they gained the financial capital and political influence necessary to shape regulatory frameworks in their favour. Advocacy groups such as AACE formalized these interests, while corporate chains leveraged national and international networks to further strengthen their positions. Parents accustomed to navigating childcare as a consumer market also contributed to institutional inertia, as a neoliberal conception of choice, emphasizing individual consumer preference over collective provision, became normalized in public discourse and constrained policy alternatives (Friendly et al. 2021; Mahon 2009b; McGinn 2023).

Political culture reinforced these dynamics. Alberta's neoliberal orientation, characterized by low taxes, privatization, and minimal state intervention, aligned naturally with a market-based childcare system. Political culture reinforced these dynamics. Alberta's longstanding neoliberal orientation—characterized by low taxes, privatization, and limited state intervention—aligned closely with a market-based childcare system (Mahon 2009b). However, this orientation was partially recalibrated during the New Democratic Party government under Premier Rachel

Notley (2015–2019). In 2017, the province introduced the $25-per-day Early Learning and Child Care pilot, expanding direct operating funding to selected centres and framing childcare as economic and social infrastructure rather than solely a private responsibility (Slaughter 2021; Friendly et al. 2021). While the pilot reduced fees and increased public planning capacity, it did not fundamentally restructure ownership patterns or exclude for-profit providers. Its subsequent rollback following the 2019 election illustrates the fragility of reforms not institutionally entrenched.

Institutional and infrastructural constraints also contributed to Alberta's path dependency. Because CWELCC's capital expansion mechanisms prioritize non-profit delivery, Alberta's long-standing reliance on commercial provision limits the province's capacity to leverage these tools for public-oriented system building. This creates a vicious cycle: because non-profit providers are scarce, government relies on for-profit providers for expansion; because expansion occurs through for-profits and public policy remains pandering to private entities, the non-profit sector remains underdeveloped. Finally, federalism itself amplifies Alberta's path dependency. CWELCC operates through bilateral agreements that allow provinces considerable flexibility in implementation. In market-oriented provinces such as Alberta, provincial autonomy acts as a buffer that protects existing institutional arrangements, even when federal policy direction shifts toward decommodification (Government of Canada 2021c).

Consequences of Commercialization in Alberta's Childcare System

One of the most enduring consequences of Alberta's commercial system is the persistence of childcare shortages, particularly in rural regions and lower-income urban neighbourhoods. Market-oriented systems, by definition, expand where profits are highest. This dynamic is documented in national and international studies (Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005),

which show that for-profit childcare tends to cluster in higher-income areas where fees can be set at levels sufficient to support profit margins.

To disentangle aggregate availability from ownership structure, Table X compares key indicators for Manitoba and Alberta in 2024 using the most recent Childcare Resource and Research Unit (CRRU) data. The comparison highlights three dimensions: (1) the proportion of for-profit provision, (2) total regulated spaces, and (3) overall coverage rates for children aged 0–12.

Table A. Manitoba and Alberta Childcare Indicators Compared (2024)

Indicator (2024)	Manitoba	Alberta	Canada
Percent of regulated full-day centre spaces (0–5) that are for-profit	7%	73%	52%
Percent of total centre spaces (0–12) that are for-profit	2%	55%	14%
Total regulated spaces (0–12)	41,870	176,945	1,581,973
Percent of children (0–12) for whom a regulated space is available	20%	24%	30%

Data derived from Friendly et al. (2025).

Several patterns emerge from Table A. First, the divergence in ownership structure remains stark. In 2024, only 7 percent of Manitoba's regulated full-day spaces for children aged 0–5 were for-profit, compared to 73 percent in Alberta. When considering total centre spaces for children aged 0–12, the contrast persists: 5.2 percent in Manitoba versus 65 percent in Alberta. Manitoba's system remains overwhelmingly non-profit, whereas Alberta's is structurally commercial.

Second, aggregate availability does not differ dramatically between the two provinces. Coverage rates for children aged 0–12 are similar, approximately 20 percent in Manitoba and 24

percent in Alberta. This suggests that Alberta's greater reliance on commercial providers has not translated into substantially higher overall access.

The comparison therefore sharpens the analytical distinction: the core interprovincial difference lies less in the quantity of spaces than in the governance and ownership model through which those spaces are delivered. This distinction is crucial for assessing CWELCC's transformative potential. If aggregate expansion can occur under both models, the normative and distributive consequences of ownership—wage levels, reinvestment of public funds, geographic equity, and long-term system stability—become the central terrain of policy debate.

Despite federal and provincial efforts to expand licensed spaces, Alberta's childcare coverage remains low relative to need. As of 2019 (before CWELCC's implementation), only about 22 percent of children aged 0–5 had access to a regulated childcare space, indicating a significant shortfall in licensed capacity relative to the child population. Even following years of investment through CWELCC and other space creation initiatives, provincial data indicate that coverage rates have improved only modestly. By late 2024, many communities across Alberta still fell below the generally accepted benchmark of one space per three children (24 percent coverage), with overall provincial coverage rates hovering around 30 percent, well below targets set in other jurisdictions and far short of universal provision (Friendly, Beach, Aruran, Cossette, Hu, Lillace and Forer 2025).

CWELCC has not fully resolved these inequities. While reduced fees increased demand, Alberta's limited non-profit infrastructure and continued reliance on commercial operators constrained its capacity to create new spaces in underserved areas. The province's willingness to channel capital funds to for-profits does not guarantee equitable distribution of new spaces; instead, expansion continues to mirror market logic.

CWELCC has significantly reduced fees for Alberta families, moving many centres toward $10-a-day childcare and lowering average parent costs by approximately 50 percent by 2023 (Childcare Resource and Research Unit 2023). However, these reductions interact with commercialization in ways that limit long-term progress.

In a heavily commercial system:

- fee caps squeeze operators with thin margins,
- operators pressure government for increased flexibility,
- and quality-related spending (wages, programming) becomes vulnerable to cuts.

Many Alberta operators publicly argued that CWELCC made their financial operations unsustainable, suggesting that they would exit the program if restrictions increased. This underscores how fragile affordability gains are within a privatized system: without public delivery or non-profit dominance, affordability relies on continuous provincial-federal negotiation with profit-driven firms (Childcare Resource and Research Unit 2023; Friendly et al. 2021).

Beyond issues of access and affordability, commercialization also raises concerns about governance, oversight, and risk management within childcare systems. Commercial childcare systems also pose distinct regulatory challenges, as demonstrated by the 2023 E. coli outbreak in Calgary. The outbreak, one of the largest in Canadian childcare history, was traced to a privately operated central kitchen that supplied meals to multiple for-profit childcare centres, revealing systemic vulnerabilities associated with market-based provision (Dryden September 13, 2023; Sherif 2023). Investigations showed that the kitchen had outsourced food production processes and operated with cost-cutting measures typical of commercial service models, which raised concerns about food safety practices in profit-driven environments (Friendly et al. 2021). The

crisis also exposed gaps in Alberta's regulatory oversight capacity; inspectors struggled to monitor contracted service providers effectively, pointing to broader structural weaknesses in supervising a fragmented, privatized childcare sector. Collectively, the outbreak illustrates how commercialization can heighten regulatory risks by incentivizing outsourcing, reducing quality investments, and stretching public monitoring systems beyond their capacity. While no system is immune to regulatory failures, the scale and severity of the outbreak highlighted risks inherent in large corporate childcare models, where consolidation can create single points of failure affecting hundreds of children simultaneously (Dryden September 13, 2023; Sherif 2023).

Alberta's childcare system illustrates the profound challenges of transforming a market-dominated sector into a publicly oriented, rights-based system. Its historical reliance on parent fee subsidies, deregulation, and private entrepreneurship created deep institutional and ideological path dependencies that continue to shape the province's response to CWELCC (Mahon 2009b). Even with unprecedented federal investment, Alberta has used the flexibility inherent in Canada's federal system to implement CWELCC in ways that protect commercial operators and maintain a neoliberal policy orientation that prioritizes markets over public provision (Friendly et al. 2021).

This case demonstrates that CWELCC's transformative potential is limited when implementation depends on provincial systems structured around market logics. Alberta's political culture, rooted in notions of parental choice, limited government, and entrepreneurial innovation, aligns closely with the interests of commercial childcare operators (Prentice 2009). These actors wield substantial lobbying power, and their influence has been central in shaping Alberta's adaptation of CWELCC's principles, ensuring continued access to public funds while

resisting the federal government's intention to prioritize non-profit expansion (Friendly et al. 2021; McGinn 2023).

The consequences of commercialization, persistent shortages, spatial inequities, workforce precarity, and regulatory vulnerabilities, underscore why childcare cannot be effectively delivered as a market commodity. Feminist political economy demonstrates that childcare, as a form of social reproduction, is undermined when governed by profit incentives rather than collective rights, leading to inequitable outcomes and degraded quality (Bakker 2007). Path-dependency analysis further shows why reversing commercialization is extraordinarily difficult once market structures have been entrenched (Mahon 2009c; Pierson 2000). Federalism compounds these challenges, as provincial autonomy allows market-heavy systems to persist even under a national reform framework like CWELCC (Mahon 2023).

Together, these dynamics reveal the central argument of this thesis: preventing commercialization today is essential to building a rights-based, universal childcare system, because once markets dominate, they generate powerful vested interests and institutional structures that are extremely difficult to dismantle. Alberta is not simply an outlier; it is a cautionary case of what occurs when childcare becomes a site of profit accumulation rather than a public responsibility.

In contrast to Manitoba's predominantly non-profit, community-governed system, Alberta's trajectory highlights the ongoing tension between market-oriented and publicly oriented paradigms within CWELCC. Whether Canada achieves true third-order change, transforming childcare into a publicly governed, universally accessible right, will depend on confronting the structural power of commercial interests and rebuilding childcare as essential social infrastructure.

Taken together, the Alberta case aligns closely with the four analytic categories and clarifies how they interact to sustain commercialization under CWELCC. In ownership and governance terms, Alberta's childcare system remains majority for-profit and features a commercially organized sector with significant institutional influence. In terms of policy instruments, the province has historically relied on fee subsidies and affordability mechanisms and, under CWELCC, has emphasized cost-control compliance rather than structural tools such as binding wage grids or public delivery capacity. From a federal–provincial relations perspective, Alberta used the flexibility inherent in bilateralism to negotiate implementation terms that preserved for-profit access to federal funding, illustrating the limits of federal leverage where provincial policy legacies are deeply entrenched. Finally, discursive framing—particularly the repeated invocation of "choice," "flexibility," and "partnership"—operates as an ideational mechanism that normalizes market provision and supports the political legitimacy of commercial actors.

While the analysis is structured by these four categories, Alberta also reveals an additional dynamic that cuts across them: the role of corporate concentration and organized industry advocacy as a feedback mechanism that intensifies path dependency. These findings reinforce the thesis' comparative conclusion: CWELCC can achieve affordability improvements across provinces, but in market-dominant contexts its instruments risk stabilizing—rather than transforming—the commercial childcare model.

CONCLUSION: LESSONS FROM MANITOBA AND ALBERTA

This thesis has demonstrated that the commercialization of childcare under the CWELCC framework is not a natural or inevitable outcome, but is the product of deliberate political, institutional, and ideological decisions embedded in provincial policy histories. Feminist political

economy research shows that childcare systems reflect gendered divisions of labour, capitalist imperatives, and the longstanding reluctance of the state to treat care as a public right rather than a private responsibility (Bakker 2007; Beach et al. 2023; Mahon 2009c). The findings of this research confirm that these structural forces continue to shape the implementation of the CWELCC agreements, and that provincial variation remains the most significant determinant of whether federal investments advance decommodification or reproduce market logic.

Across both case chapters, the findings were organized using the four analytic categories outlined in the Methods section—ownership and governance, policy instruments, federal–provincial relations, and discursive framing—and the comparative results line up closely with these dimensions. Ownership and governance emerged as the most decisive structural variable: Manitoba's predominantly non-profit, community-governed system enabled CWELCC funds to reinforce decommodifying trajectories, while Alberta's majority for-profit landscape embedded commercial imperatives that shaped implementation and protected market participation. Policy instruments operated differently across these ownership contexts: Manitoba used wage grids, operating supports, and non-profit-oriented expansion plans to strengthen workforce and affordability goals, whereas Alberta's reliance on fee-subsidy logics and its Cost Control Framework largely regulated—rather than displaced—profit-oriented delivery. Federal–provincial relations further mediated outcomes, as the bilateral structure of CWELCC permitted Alberta to negotiate flexibility around for-profit eligibility while Manitoba's pre-existing alignment with federal priorities facilitated smoother implementation. Finally, discursive framing consistently functioned as an enabling mechanism: Manitoba's public-good and rights-oriented narratives reinforced non-profit legitimacy and resistance to privatization, while Alberta's "choice," "flexibility," and "partnership" framing normalized commercialization and

strengthened the political viability of market-first governance. Although additional dynamics—particularly the role of organized advocacy and policy drift—were salient in both cases, these operated primarily as cross-cutting mechanisms that intensified or constrained the four core dimensions rather than displacing them.

CWELCC marks a historic federal intervention in childcare, but the agreement alone does not dismantle the market-oriented policy architecture that has characterized much of the sector for decades. Canadian childcare developed as a fragmented system shaped by provincial autonomy, fiscal unevenness, and mixed-market delivery (Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005; Prentice 2009). Because CWELCC is implemented through bilateral agreements, its transformative potential is mediated by provincial ideology, administrative capacity, and established ownership structures (Mahon 2009c; Telford et al. 2008). The analysis confirms that these contextual factors profoundly shape how CWELCC's instruments operate in practice.

Manitoba's experience illustrates how a strong non-profit sector can translate federal funding into public-oriented reforms. The province's childcare system, built through decades of feminist advocacy, operating grants, and community governance structures, embedded accountability and transparency long before CWELCC (Beach et al. 2023; Friendly and Prentice 2009). Manitoba thus entered CWELCC with a policy architecture aligned with federal goals: non-profit dominance, stable funding, and a regulatory regime emphasizing workforce conditions (Friendly et al. 2024). This allowed the province to implement affordability measures, expand non-profit spaces, and strengthen wage supports without undermining existing institutional logics. These findings align with a longstanding body of research showing that non-profit and public providers produce stronger outcomes for children and educators because they reinvest

surplus revenue into staffing and programming rather than extracting profit (Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005; Doherty et al. 2000).

Alberta, by contrast, demonstrates how entrenched market systems can reshape federal reforms to protect commercial interests. Alberta's childcare policy landscape reflects decades of neoliberal restructuring, parent-subsidy models, and political discourse centred on parental "choice" and private-sector innovation (Mahon 2009c). As a result, for-profit providers, especially large corporate chains, dominate the sector, controlling the majority of licensed spaces (Beach et al. 2023). Empirical research consistently shows that for-profit childcare is associated with lower wages, higher staff turnover, and weaker program quality compared to non-profit provision (Beach et al. 2023; Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005; Doherty et al. 2000). These dynamics persisted under CWELCC: despite federal guidance prioritizing non-profit expansion, Alberta secured a Cost Control Framework enabling for-profit operators to access federal funds, thereby preserving the province's market-first orientation (Government of Alberta 2023). Alberta thus illustrates how policy legacies and commercial lobbying can redirect federal reforms in ways that maintain existing inequities.

It is also important to situate Alberta's negotiation of its CWELCC agreement within the broader political context of intergovernmental relations at the time. The bilateral agreements were concluded in the aftermath of the 2021 federal election, during a period in which the federal governing party held a minority mandate and faced persistent regional hostility in Alberta, including renewed separatist rhetoric and "Wexit" discourse (Markusoff 2019). In this context, the federal government had incentives to secure provincial participation in the program—even if doing so required flexibility in implementation. Alberta's insistence on accommodating for-profit operators through its Cost Control Framework can therefore be understood not only as a

function of path dependency and corporate lobbying, but also as a product of strategic bargaining within a politically polarized federal landscape. The outcome reflects both institutional legacies and the contingent power dynamics of the moment: federal objectives of non-profit prioritization were tempered by the pragmatic need to maintain national program cohesion in a jurisdiction marked by strong provincial autonomy claims and skepticism toward federal intervention.

Taken together, these cases confirm that ownership structure materially affects wages, workforce stability, program quality, and equity, regardless of the scale of federal investment. Studies spanning decades demonstrate that non-profit and public providers deliver higher quality care, pay better wages, and achieve greater workforce stability because they are not required to extract profit from public funding (Beach et al. 2023; Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005; Doherty et al. 2000). In commercial ized systems, fee caps can intensify financial pressure on operators, profit-oriented centres may lobby for increased flexibility, and spending on quality, particularly wages, remains vulnerable to cuts (Beach et al. 2023). These dynamics mean that CWELCC's tools operate differently depending on provincial context: in Manitoba, they support decommodification; in Alberta, they risk subsidizing and stabilizing private markets.

At the same time, the not-for-profit model is not synonymous with public-sector employment and carries its own structural constraints. While non-profit governance may limit profit extraction, many centres remain financially dependent on fixed operating grants, parent fees, and supplementary fundraising (Friendly et al. 2021; Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005). Unlike public-sector employers, non-profit providers cannot draw on the state's taxing authority to expand their "ability to pay." In labour relations, this distinction matters. Public-sector wage arbitration treats government employers differently from private or voluntary-sector employers because fiscal capacity ultimately derives from taxation power (Panitch and Swartz 2003). By

contrast, non-profit childcare centres operate within tightly bounded budgets, making substantial wage increases more difficult to sustain without corresponding increases in public funding. The fragmented and financially precarious nature of the sector has historically limited collective bargaining coverage among early childhood educators (Doherty et al. 2000). As a result, even in provinces with strong non-profit dominance, workforce stabilization ultimately depends on the depth and reliability of public funding commitments rather than ownership form alone.

The persistence of mixed-market childcare systems in Alberta and Manitoba cannot be explained solely through ideological commitment to privatization. Structural factors—including the capital costs associated with building publicly owned childcare infrastructure and the longstanding institutional placement of childcare outside core education systems—also shape provincial policy trajectories. When childcare is framed as a social service rather than as essential public infrastructure, large-scale public expansion appears fiscally and administratively exceptional rather than expected. In this context, expanding services through existing market actors becomes a pragmatic policy pathway, even when federal agreements signal a preference for public or non-profit provision. Strengthening the public foundations of Canada's childcare system may therefore require not only funding commitments, but also a reframing of childcare as core social infrastructure and a corresponding shift in how governments plan, finance, and govern early learning and care systems.

Expanding publicly delivered childcare would likely increase government operating expenditures, particularly as educators become integrated into more standardized compensation structures that include higher wages, benefits, and clearer career pathways. Because childcare is a highly labour-intensive service, improvements in workforce compensation represent a significant portion of system costs. However, existing research suggests that these increased

expenditures should be understood as investments rather than simply fiscal burdens. Studies of childcare expansion, particularly evaluations of Quebec's universal childcare program, demonstrate that affordable childcare can increase parental labour force participation and generate additional tax revenues that offset a substantial share of public spending (Cleveland and Krashinsky 1998; Fortin, Godbout, and St-Cerny 2012). As Prentice (2020) argues, the coexistence of high parent fees and low wages in many childcare systems reflects insufficient public investment rather than the inherent cost of providing care. From this perspective, the higher operating costs associated with publicly funded childcare systems may be justified by broader economic returns as well as improvements in workforce stability, accessibility, and service quality.

Feminist political economy helps explain why commercialization persists even under unprecedented federal investment. Care work remains structurally undervalued because it is feminized, racialized, and historically framed as "natural" women's labour rather than skilled professional work (Bakker 2007). Wages for ECEs have stagnated for decades and remain below living-wage benchmarks in most provinces (Doherty et al. 2000; Friendly et al. 2024). Without binding provincial wage standards and sustained public funding, CWELCC risks reproducing gendered labour inequities rather than transforming them. Moreover, the resilience of commercial delivery models reflects the enduring influence of neoliberal assumptions that private providers are more efficient or responsive—claims contradicted by extensive empirical evidence (Beach et al. 2023; Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005).

Federalism further mediates the extent of policy change. While CWELCC's conditional transfers represent a shift toward national coordination, provincial autonomy continues to permit ideological divergence that undermines equity (Telford et al. 2008). The bilateral model allows

provinces to implement affordability measures within their preferred governance frameworks, producing uneven outcomes. Provinces with robust non-profit infrastructures, such as Manitoba, can pursue decommodification (although not yet realized), while those with entrenched commercial systems, such as Alberta, risk preserving inequities under a new funding regime (Beach 2021; Friendly et al. 2024).

In light of the institutional constraints identified in this thesis, strengthening CWELCC's public and non-profit orientation will require more assertive federal leadership in partnership with social movements advocating childcare as a right. While the bilateral model reflects Canada's federal structure, the federal government retains significant leverage through fiscal transfers and national standard-setting. Future federal action could more clearly prioritize non-profit and public expansion by tying capital funding to not-for-profit and public delivery, strengthening reporting and accountability mechanisms, and conditioning transfers on measurable progress in workforce stabilization and wage grids (Beach et al. 2023; Friendly et al. 2024). Federal legislation—such as a strengthened national childcare act—could also entrench principles of public accountability, accessibility, and public prioritization, reducing the ability of provinces to redirect federal investments toward commercial expansion. At the same time, historical experience demonstrates that federal policy change rarely occurs in isolation. Feminist, labour, and community childcare movements have long played a central role in shaping national childcare policy and will remain essential in pressuring governments to uphold CWELCC's original intent of building a publicly oriented system (Mahon 2009c; Prentice 2009). Together, stronger federal conditionality and sustained social movement advocacy represent the most plausible pathway for overcoming provincial path dependencies and ensuring that CWELCC advances decommodification rather than stabilizing subsidized childcare markets.

A rights-based analysis highlights the limits of CWELCC as an executive agreement rather than a statutory entitlement. International instruments, including CEDAW and the UNCRC, affirm children's rights to development and women's rights to economic participation, both of which depend on access to childcare (United Nations 1979). Yet Canada has not embedded childcare as a legal right domestically, leaving CWELCC's gains vulnerable to political change, fiscal austerity, or shifts in government priorities (Beach et al. 2023). Without rights-based legislation, the system remains contingent rather than guaranteed.

Intersectional analysis reveals that commercialization disproportionately harms racialized, immigrant, rural, and low-income families and educators. For-profit childcare expands primarily in higher-income urban areas, leaving marginalized communities underserved (Beach et al. 2023; Statistics Canada 2022). Racialized and immigrant women, who make up a large portion of the ECE workforce, continue to experience low wages, precarious working conditions, and limited career mobility (Doherty et al. 2000). CWELCC improves affordability but does not eliminate these structural inequities, especially in provinces that maintain commercial expansion.

Finally, social movements remain essential in driving and sustaining policy change. CWELCC itself is the outcome of decades of feminist, labour, and community activism that reframed childcare as essential social infrastructure (Beach et al. 2023). These same actors now work to ensure CWELCC is implemented in ways that advance equity, protect non-profit expansion, and secure workforce improvements. Without sustained social movement pressure, the system risks sliding back toward a subsidized market rather than evolving into a universal public entitlement.

Overall, this thesis finds that CWELCC has delivered first- and second-order policy change, introducing new tools and redefining goals, but has not yet achieved the third-order paradigm shift required to reconceptualize childcare as a universal public right (Hall 1993). Canada stands at a critical juncture. Without stronger commitments to public ownership, binding wage standards, Indigenous-led governance, and rights-based legislation, CWELCC risks consolidating into a subsidized mixed-market rather than a truly public system. The future of childcare in Canada will depend on sustained political will, robust federal stewardship, strengthened provincial governance, and continued feminist and community mobilization to resist commercialization and advance a publicly funded, publicly governed childcare system.

Looking ahead, further research is needed to assess how CWELCC evolves over time and whether it can shift Canada toward a publicly governed childcare system. Longitudinal studies should examine how ownership structures change under CWELCC, particularly whether non-profit and public providers increase their share of licensed spaces or whether commercial actors continue to adapt and expand. Additional research is required to understand how provincial wage grids affect ECE recruitment, retention, and professionalization. Intersectional analyses are also crucial to evaluate whether CWELCC reduces or reproduces inequities in access for racialized, immigrant, rural, and children with disabilities. Finally, comparative studies of provincial political economies and international childcare regimes could offer deeper insights into how federalism, advocacy movements, and policy feedback shape the prospects for a future national childcare act and the broader goal of treating childcare as a universal public right.

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