

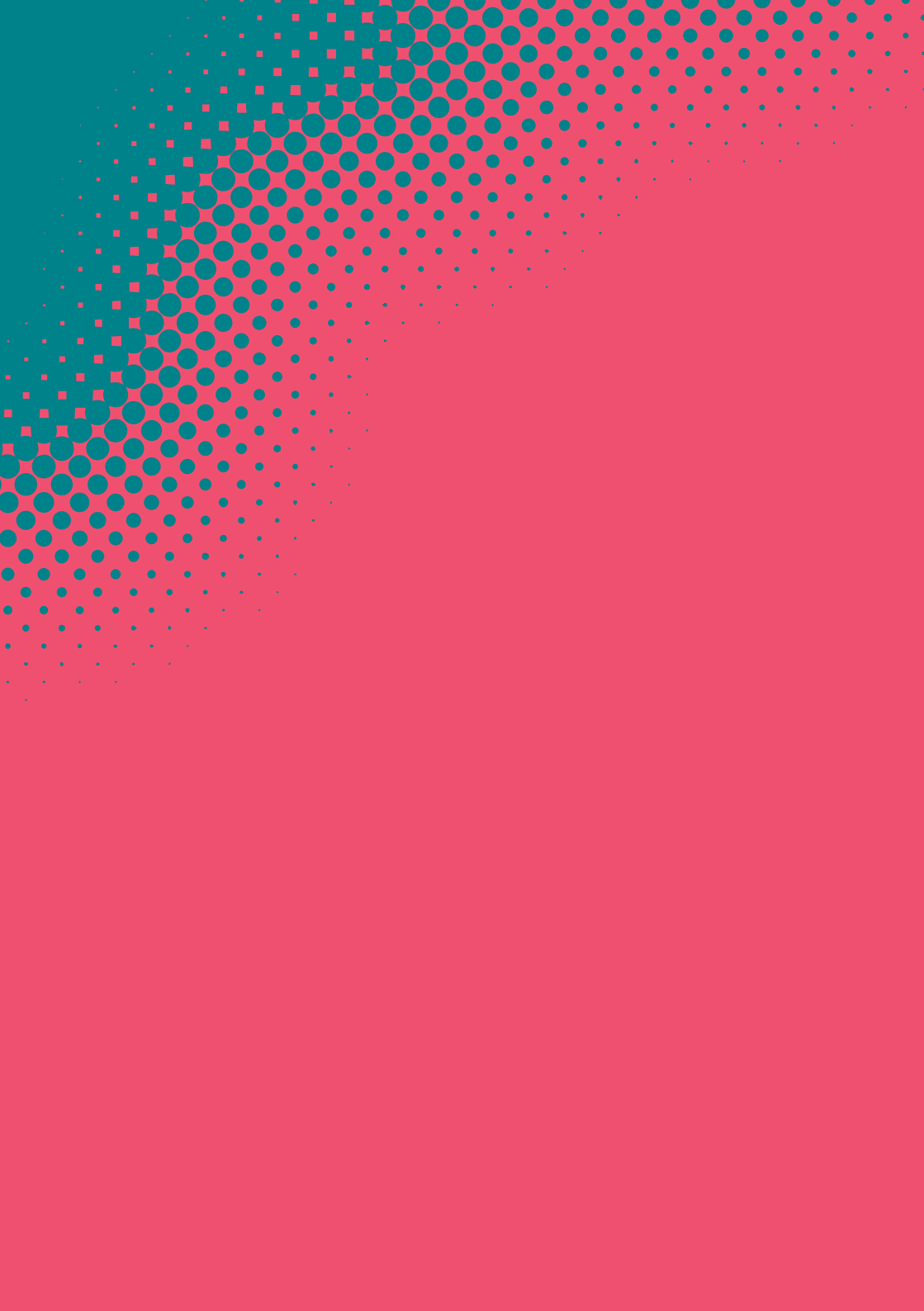
THE GLOBAL
INSTITUTE
FOR WOMEN'S
LEADERSHIP

KING'S
College
LONDON

Essays *on*
Equality

The politics of childcare

2023



Essays on Equality

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Foreword



Julia Gillard
*Former Prime
Minister of Australia
and Chair of the
Global Institute for
Women's Leadership*

The message from the essays in this collection is clear. A robust childcare system is foundational to gender equality and the wellbeing, not only of children and parents, but of society as a whole. When women leave the workforce, it reduces the availability of skills in the economy and puts them at greater risk of long-term poverty, particularly in old age. Getting childcare right will not only help stressed parents, it is fundamental to the success of the global economy and the wellbeing of future generations.

Unfortunately, the evidence shows the system in the UK is broken. Women are leaving work because they cannot afford childcare costs, and early years professionals are quitting the industry because they are underpaid and undervalued. The system does not work for parents, childcare workers or the economy. Early years education is the bedrock of children's future attainment, yet it has been routinely overlooked, undercut and dismissed. Covid-19 and the ongoing cost of living crisis have brought these issues into sharp relief and action is urgently needed to address them.

What also comes through in these essays is that while care of children under school age is a crunch point, we need to take a much broader lens to close the motherhood gap. From pregnancy discrimination and unequal parental leave to the structuring of the school day, parents – and mothers in particular – face the pressures of balancing work with childcare for over a decade of each child's life.

We are starting to see some progress in this area. The pandemic precipitated a huge shift towards flexible working in some sectors, and our research shows that this offers significant benefits for working parents. But there are still huge barriers to effective flexible working, and we know that parents (usually mothers) too often secure this flexibility at the expense of job quality, pay and career progression. And while greater job flexibility may smooth over some of the sharper edges of the struggle, it is not a panacea.

Childcare provision is a universal issue, and we must take a global perspective to fix it. This collection showcases best-practice examples from around the world, highlighting diverse experiences of parenthood. The aftermath of the pandemic and soaring cost of living have brought the childcare debate into the spotlight – there is an opportunity to harness this attention and bring about the change that is so urgently needed, to the benefit of children, parents and especially mothers. Care is infrastructure, and it is time it was valued as such.

Thank you to all our authors for their excellent essay contributions – I hope you find the collection as enlightening and informative as I have. If you would like to pick up any of the themes here, or have any other thoughts, please do get in touch with the GIWL team at giwl@kcl.ac.uk.

Julia Gillard

Mothers are overdue a revolution of their own



Joeli Brearley
Author and Founder
of Pregnant Then
Screwed

“I wish I had known five years ago, as a young, childless manager, that mothers are the people you need on your team,” said Katharine Zaleski, an ex-manager at HuffPost, in an apology letter she penned for Fortune magazine. “I secretly rolled my eyes at a mother who couldn’t make it to last-minute drinks with me and my team,” she wrote, adding, “I didn’t disagree when another female editor said we should hurry up and fire another woman before she ‘got pregnant’.”

Then Zaleski had her own child and realised she had been perpetuating a workplace culture that revolves “around how men bond” and she had failed to recognise the unique strengths of working mothers. “For mothers in the workplace, it’s death by a thousand cuts – and sometimes it’s other women holding the knives.”

In 2016, the Equality and Human Rights Commission released the most robust and comprehensive research report into pregnancy and maternity discrimination that has ever been produced. It found that more than three quarters of mothers experience some form of discrimination in the workplace, and 54,000 women a year are pushed out of their job for daring to procreate. That’s a woman

every 10 minutes in the UK. One in nine pregnant women lose their job for getting pregnant. The report made a number of sensible recommendations for change. Six years later, not a single one has been implemented.

.....
“For mothers in the workplace, it’s death by a thousand cuts – and sometimes it’s other women holding the knives.”
.....

Pregnancy and maternity discrimination is one of the many reasons women are poorer than men. We’ve all heard of the gender pay gap, but the term itself is somewhat misleading. Yes, there is a difference in pay between men and women, but it isn’t all about gender – because the pay gap



The March of the Mummies. Photograph: Pregnant Then Screwed

3 in 4
mothers
experience
discrimination in
the workplace

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the workforce after
having children

1 in 9
pregnant women
lose their jobs for
getting pregnant

between mothers and women without children is wider than the pay gap between men and women without children.¹ This procreation pay gap is what sociologists refer to as “the motherhood penalty”. Mothers don’t want to be paid less than men or their childless counterparts, yet research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that by the time a woman’s first child is 12 years old her hourly pay rate is, on average, 33 per cent behind a man’s.

Men get pay rises and promotions when they have kids – the TUC estimates that a full-time working dad is paid 21 per cent more than childless men² – while women get pay cuts and demotions when they become a mother. Some would argue that this is because mothers tend to do less paid work than women without children, and that’s certainly true, but that doesn’t tell the full story.

In addition to the negative maternal bias that many employers hold, mothers also encounter a variety of structural challenges when trying to have children and a career, including an unaffordable, inaccessible, dysfunctional childcare system. The UK has the most expensive childcare

in the developed world.³ Two-thirds of parents pay the same or more for their childcare as their housing. This means that many mothers are grafting their backsides off just to pay someone else to look after their children, and that's if you can get a childcare place. We lost 4,000 nurseries last year due to financial pressures on their business and an inability to recruit staff – who are nearly all women – because they are paid more for working in a supermarket or McDonald's than they are as early years educators. Flipping burgers is valued more than educating and caring for our precious little humans.

“Many mothers are grafting their backsides off just to pay someone else to look after their children, and that's if you can get a childcare place”

This lack of investment in anything that involves caring is an extension of the fact that we just expect women to do it for free, alongside the cleaning and cooking. Data from the Office for National Statistics⁴ shows that women do 60 per cent more of the unpaid labour,⁵ and this was painfully apparent during the various Covid-19 lockdowns as mothers risked their career and their sanity to prop up society, ensuring the world kept spinning and society didn't collapse into barbarian-like squalor. All of this work – the society-saving stuff – isn't paid, and apparently has no value to society as it isn't recognised in GDP.

I'm not saying that men are lazy, feckless, layabouts. Men and women tend to work the same number of hours; it's just that a larger portion of women's work is unpaid. It's also not the case that women are the more natural caregivers, while men are only useful for beating their chest and dragging home the bacon. Men are socially, behaviourally and psychologically primed to parent. The problem is our parental leave benefit encourages women to take long periods out of the workforce, while pushing men back to the office at breakneck speed, as if they are surplus to requirements.

.....
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We all fall in line. The mother becomes the primary caregiver; the father, the primary breadwinner. As a result, 38 per cent of women work part-time⁶ so that they can cope with all of the other unpaid work they have to do. But part-time work is paid, on average, £5 less per hour than full-time work, and working part-time reduces your chances of being promoted by more than half.⁷ If you find yourself looking for work, the likelihood is you will end up in a job that is well below your pay and skill level, as only 10 per cent of jobs were advertised as part-time in 2022.⁸ It's no wonder the average woman's pension pot is £100,000 below that of a man's.

Ending the motherhood penalty is not easy.

No country is immune to this problem, but other countries are doing far better than the UK, and it is in the government's gift to improve the situation through policy. What's more, these four policy amends would actually benefit the economy, while improving the lives of women and children:

1. An affordable, accessible, high quality childcare system.
2. All jobs to be advertised with flexible working options, unless there is a good business reason not to do so.
3. Ring-fenced properly remunerated paternity leave and maternity leave.
4. Access to justice for women who experience pregnancy or maternity discrimination.

These would make an excellent start, but I won't be holding my breath that they will be implemented any time soon. Certainly not without women taking to the streets to demand our voices are heard. It's time for a motherhood revolution.

Childcare decisions must be based on what's best for families – not gender



Rachel de Souza
Children's
Commissioner
for England

It is astonishing how one year can change the way we view family. My recent *Family Review*, which examined family life across the UK, shone an exciting new spotlight about what family means in the 21st century, how the events of the pandemic have shifted the way that children interact with the people and world around them, and how we care for the young in our society.

One of the most interesting findings was about the impact Covid had on fathers. The amount of time fathers spent on unpaid childcare almost doubled from 47 minutes a day in 2014 to 90 minutes a day during lockdown. Mothers' time increased much less significantly, from 88 minutes to 102 minutes.

The barriers in place to fathers spending time with their children are so strong that it took a worldwide pandemic to overcome them. And while it is easy to feel disheartened by the fact that their childcare time fell back to 56 minutes in 2022, we should bear in mind that mothers' time fell to 85 minutes, lower than before the pandemic. The gap between the amount of time mothers and fathers spend with their children is, however slowly, closing. But it can't and mustn't take seismic events to keep closing that gap.

“The barriers in place to fathers spending time with their children are so strong that it took a worldwide pandemic to overcome them”

Because things are changing for mothers too. Over the past 20 years the employment rate for mothers has increased from 67 per cent to 76 per cent, while the rate for fathers has increased only slightly from 90 per cent to 92 per cent. Over time, the working and childcare patterns within families seem to be becoming less gendered.



But there is still a long way to go. When asked who gave them the most care and support, the overwhelming majority of 8- to 17-year-olds who took part in my survey selected one of their parents – but while 72 per cent selected their mother, only 12 per cent selected their father.

There was one other particularly revealing statistic in the Review – although it was perhaps less encouraging. When asked, in 2022, about sharing childcare, nearly half (49 per cent) of fathers said that it was shared equally between both parents. Only 20 per cent of mothers said this. These figures don't match up, and the data supports my suspicion that mothers might be the ones responding more accurately.

That is why, although getting early education and childcare outside the home right matters for everyone, it is still likely to be mothers who are most affected when it doesn't work well.

I often hear the argument that we need to support parents to stay at home with their children if they would prefer to, and that we shouldn't be pushing people into using formal childcare. I agree that the choice should always be with parents.

The problem is, when we talk about support for “parents” to stay at home with their children, in reality we too often

mean mothers. Shared parental leave has miniscule levels of take-up, which is perhaps not surprising when it still requires a mother to surrender her leave for a father to take any. When time is specifically earmarked for fathers, the take up rates are far higher. That's why when we talk about reforming childcare, we must do it in tandem with reforming parental leave arrangements – the gendered expectations on parents are set very early on in a baby's life, and unless we change that childcare will continue to be a “women's issue”.

While I hope these longer-term shifts towards a genuinely shared responsibility for childcare and work will continue, for now it is still overwhelmingly mothers who raise with me again and again that childcare needs sorting out. Childcare was in fact one of the most commonly cited pressures on family life in my *Family Review*, so it is vital that we resolve it.

That is why I recently set out my vision for a reformed childcare offer. I want to see schools extending their hours, and offering care for younger children too, as they are trusted and liked by families. I want childminder agencies reimaged, so that every local area has an agency which can offer bespoke brokerage services to parents, to create a childcare offer that works for them and their children, as well as driving up quality. And I want to end the cliff edge of support at the end of parental leave, so that those who do want to return to work can. Too often ideas for early education and care have worked either for children or for parents, as if they existed in isolation from one another. I wanted to show how to create a system that works for families – one that never compromises on quality, that is accessible and affordable, and flexible to the reality of family life.

In years to come I hope – for the sake of fathers, mothers, and most importantly, children – that decisions about working, caring for children and using formal childcare will be based on what genuinely works best for families, rather than gender.

Covid and the cost of living crisis have exposed faultlines in the childcare system



Dalia Ben-Galim
Freelance
researcher

Time and time again the high cost of childcare is locking too many parents – especially mothers – out of (re-)entering work. The lack of affordable early years education also has a negative impact on children’s social and emotional development and school readiness. High-quality and affordable early years education simply does not exist for families who want it or need it. But it doesn’t have to be this way.

Highlighting the high cost of childcare and the inequality in access in the UK is not new. For over two decades, Coram’s annual childcare survey has tracked childcare costs and shown shocking increases with many families unable to pay for the childcare they need.¹

But what is new is that flaws in early years provision have been exposed by skyrocketing inflation and the pandemic. As prices continues to soar, it is no longer someone else who is struggling; it is nurses, social workers and childcare workers themselves – many of whom were on the frontline during the pandemic – who are not able to afford childcare.



Even more shockingly, one in five children growing up in key worker households are living in poverty;² and one in four parents are reporting skipping meals or not turning on their heating because childcare is unaffordable. This rises to over half of all single parents.³ Almost everyone knows someone who has had to make changes to their work or childcare because of costs.

“Flaws in early years provision have been exposed by skyrocketing inflation and the pandemic”

With nursery costs often up to 65 per cent of a parent’s take-home pay,⁴ the UK regularly tops international league tables; not on productivity and growth, but on the cost of childcare.

Childcare costs constrain mothers’ choices to work. An estimated 1.3 million women are prevented from taking a job; 1.7 million women are prevented from taking additional hours; and over half a million are estimated to have quit all because of childcare issues.⁵ Caring responsibilities are significantly contributing to rising inactivity “reversing a 30-year trend of rising participation among parents and particularly lone parents.”⁶ The last Autumn statement could and should have done something to enable more parents to choose the balance between work and care.

It is these factors in combination – rising inflation and recession – that is now visibly plunging a highly flawed childcare system into acute crisis. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) has shown that overall spending on childcare grew in England from £1.5bn in 2001/2 to more than £5bn last year,⁷ but it is the distribution of this spend that creates gaps in provision and contributes to unaffordable provision for parents and providers.

Expanded entitlements for disadvantaged two-year-olds and increased provision for working families have driven much of the increased spend. But at the same time, this has left significant holes in provision – especially for families with

younger children, and in areas where childcare is costly to deliver. Government funding for the free entitlement doesn't cover the cost of delivery for most providers according to the Early Years Alliance.⁸ The same survey reports that one in three providers were operating at a loss, and almost half (48 per cent) were considering leaving the sector or had already left,⁹ because the numbers simply don't stack up.

Costs for providers have risen faster than general inflation¹⁰ and the IFS estimates this trend to continue,¹¹ largely driven by wages. But again, beneath the headlines is a more complicated picture. A poorly paid and undervalued workforce is experiencing high turnover, burnt-out from having been on the frontline during Covid.

The number of childcare places is decreasing in areas where families cannot afford any additional costs;¹² and these are often areas of high levels of deprivation. The structure of the current system means that providers have few options to make up the shortfall other than to pass the costs onto parents, lower quality or decrease capacity. Different funding initiatives have created an unwieldy and complicated system for parents and providers to navigate with arbitrary boundaries between different parts of central and local government resulting in patchy and unaffordable provision for too many.

If a new system was being designed for early childhood education and care, the policy aims of boosting children's social and emotional development and supporting parents – especially mothers – back into work would remain. But the design would be radically different.

With developmental gaps of up to 11 months already appearing when children start school between those who have attended high quality early years education and those who haven't¹³ this is urgent. There is a strong imperative to target access to those who struggle to afford it. Widening availability for all two-year-olds to access high quality care and shifting existing resources to those households where costs are a higher proportion of income would be a welcome start.¹⁴ For example, 70 per cent of three- and four-year-old

65%

of parents' take-home pay is spent on nursery costs

1.3 million

women are prevented from taking a job due to childcare costs

1 in 4

parents skip meals or don't turn on heating due to childcare costs

children eligible for 30 hours provision are in the top half of earnings.¹⁵ It means children in single parent families, or in training and education, are unlikely to receive it. Reforming Universal Credit by increasing the maximum amount of childcare expenses to reflect actual costs and guaranteeing support for upfront childcare payments; in addition to increasing the early years pupil premium would also help in the short-term.¹⁶

.....
“The sector is in crisis. Families can’t afford it, maternal employment rates are plummeting, and there are widening gaps in children’s development”
.....

In the longer-term, the transformative potential of early years education could be realised by moving towards a supply-funded system and investing in a workforce of valued educators.

Early years education is one of those rare policies that could pay for itself. The Centre for Progressive Policy estimates affordable childcare could generate up to £28.2 billion in economic output per annum.¹⁷

Accessible, affordable and high-quality early years education is not easy to deliver, especially during a cost of living crisis and in the aftermath of a pandemic. But the sector is in crisis. Families can’t afford it, maternal employment rates are plummeting, and there are widening gaps in children’s development; so, if not now, when?

Parliament only changed its rules after I delayed giving birth to vote – and it still has a long way to go



Tulip Siddiq MP
Shadow Economic Secretary to the Treasury

As far back as I can remember, there are two things I always wanted – a baby sibling and, growing up in a politically charged family, to work in politics and make a difference. I was granted my first wish when I was eight years old and to my mother’s credit, she let me fuss, bathe, play and dress up my baby sister as much as I wanted. Years later this translated into my desire to have my own children and I’m now a happy, albeit overwhelmed, mother of two small children.

Perhaps what I didn’t really factor in is how my two childhood wishes were essentially in conflict. Caring for a small child and pursuing a hectic political career are not natural bedfellows, especially in the House of Commons, somewhat ironically known as the Mother of Parliaments.

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“After months of demanding reform, I ended up back in the office six weeks after giving birth. I felt I had no choice”
.....

While pregnant in 2016, I tried to clarify my maternity arrangements with parliament’s authorities. To my dismay, I found that there was no baby leave for MPs and no way of casting a vote by proxy nor electronic means. Parliament was truly archaic and made no apology for it. After months of demanding reform, I ended up back in the office six weeks after giving birth. I felt I had no choice.

I developed mastitis, a painful infection of the breast, because I returned to work quickly and hadn’t properly arranged my pumping schedule. I barely saw my daughter because of late votes, which meant I relied heavily on my husband for childcare support.

Parliament was so unforgiving. Votes were often called at midnight and meetings were scheduled early in the mornings. I commonly saw MPs saying goodnight to their children on FaceTime from the voting lobbies. I read articles



MP Tulip Siddiq sits in a wheelchair after the vote. Photograph: House of Commons/PA

describing colleagues as “lazy” because they hadn’t turned up for a vote. In reality, they were actually giving birth.

Social media was similarly merciless, with abuse often masquerading as “political discourse”. If you missed a vote, it merely said “absent”. Parliament had no maternity leave and therefore no means of recording the fact that you had just given birth. This has had real consequences for mothers who were new MPs.

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“I resented having to choose between being a ‘good mother’ and doing the job I was elected to do”
.....

Alongside my work on Brexit, education, and constituency issues, I lobbied for changes to the backwards procedures of parliament – addressing the late-night debates and the lack of proxy voting. I received vocal pushback from MPs who were clearly resistant to change.

Approaching the birth of my second child, still nothing had changed. This time I had gestational diabetes and pregnancy complications. The doctors were bringing my C-section forward to 15 January – the same date as parliament’s “Meaningful Vote” on Brexit.

With a very heavy heart, I took the decision to delay my caesarean. I resented having to choose between being a “good mother” and doing the job I was elected to do. I felt a natural duty to my child, but also to my 80,000 constituents in Hampstead and Kilburn, not least the 22,000 European Nationals whose future in the UK needs protecting.

I don't know if it was the grim picture of me voting on a wheelchair or the public's outrage at archaic rules. It's rarely obvious why change happens in Westminster. But my decision was clearly a catalyst, with the voting rules changing almost immediately, finally allowing proxy voting for new parents.

“I don't know if it was the grim picture of me voting on a wheelchair or the public's outrage at archaic rules... But my decision was clearly a catalyst”

Yet parliament still doesn't have proper maternity leave for MPs, even though some slow progress has been made since I had my first child in 2016. I vote late most Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays which means I miss bath and bedtime for the children. I still count myself lucky as I'm able to go home most nights as a London MP. It's very common to witness MPs saying good night to their children on iPads in the voting lobbies.

On an MP's salary, I count myself luckier than other working mothers who are shift working or in low paid jobs as well. My childcare costs per month are higher than my mortgage. And at every constituency surgery, I hear how families are bearing the brunt of the soaring cost of childcare. It's making an already difficult cost of living crisis even more painful for working families in my constituency and across the country. A full-time nursery place for a child under the age of two now costs almost two-thirds of a parent's weekly take-home pay in England and Wales, and over half the average weekly take-home pay in Scotland.

.....
“An estimated 1.7 million women are prevented from taking on more hours of paid work due to childcare issues”
.....

Many parents, including both middle class professionals in Hampstead and families living in poverty in Kilburn, can simply not afford these extortionate prices.¹

This is pricing mothers – who are still most likely to be the primary care givers – out of employment.

Figures from the ONS show that the number of women choosing not to work to look after their children has risen by 5 per cent in the last year alone. This is bad for women and devastating for the economy. An estimated 1.7 million women are prevented from taking on more hours of paid work due to childcare issues, and this is costing up to £28 billion in

lost economic output every year. It has contributed to the stagnant growth that has plagued the UK economy for the last 12 years and reduced mothers’ life chances.³

This hurts children too. In my previous role as Shadow Minister for Children and Early Years, I saw first-hand how the early years provision can be crucial for a child’s development. Research has shown that high quality early years education delivered by a qualified and skilled workforce is key to reducing the development gap between



children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their wealthier peers. This gap will only widen as a growing number of parents are unable to access early education and childcare.⁴

During the pandemic, parliament went fully digital and we were allowed to vote online, conduct meetings on Zoom and participate in debates virtually. It really felt like we were dragging parliament into the 21st century. I, along with like-minded MPs, genuinely thought we were about to modernise parliament. However, the minute the pandemic was over, senior politicians decided the new ways of working were detrimental to democracy (their conception of democracy still resembling something close to ancient Athens – a group of rowdy men all gathered in one place to vote) and suspended all virtual arrangements.

“We are now back to voting physically in the lobbies and missing votes when we have any form of medical condition or an emergency childcare situation”

We are now back to voting physically in the lobbies and missing votes when we have any form of medical condition or an emergency childcare situation. As I’m writing this essay, I’m resting in bed because of a tooth extraction and missing a vital vote on education!

Fighting (and sometimes winning) these battles in Westminster, while important, is just the first small step in building consensus around a new politics of motherhood. We need to win the economic argument for a fairer childcare system for parents across the country.

That’s why the Labour Party has committed to delivering free breakfast clubs for every primary school age child in England. This will help get mothers back to work as well as strengthen children’s life chances by driving up standards in reading, writing and maths for the most disadvantaged.

This will lay the foundations for an ambitious mission to build a modern childcare system, which guarantees support from the end of parental leave to the end of primary school.

Alongside this, we need a workplace culture that can give parents the flexibility they need to balance a career with childcare. That's one of the reasons why 18 months ago, with the help of campaign groups like Pregnant then Screwed, I brought forward my Flexible Working Bill to give workers the right to flexible working on the first day of employment.⁵

Our campaign has had a few successes since then. The government recently announced that it would be supporting my Labour colleague, Yasmin Qureshi's cross-party Employment Relations Bill, which will deliver important changes such as allowing employees to make two flexible working requests in any 12-month period.⁶

I tabled an amendment to the Bill to give employees the right to request flexibility from the first day of the job, rather than having to wait a ridiculous 26 weeks as set out under the current legislation. So much can happen in a woman's life – or anyone's life – in 26 weeks! I was delighted that Ministers finally listened and committed to introducing the day one right to request flexible working.⁷

I have also been supporting Labour MP Dan Jarvis's successful Private Members Bill which will make it harder for employers to make pregnant women and new mothers redundant.

While these are welcome steps forward, we need to go much further if we are going to make flexible working the default. That's why Labour has committed to build on these successes by making flexible working a genuine right for all from day one of employment, and our New Deal for Working People would make it unlawful to dismiss a woman who is pregnant, including six months after her return.

It's time to bring childcare and employment rights into the 21st Century. Mothers and children deserve nothing less.

We need a new model of fatherhood based on positive masculinity



Elliott Rae
Founder, Music
Football Fatherhood

Supporting fathers to be active in their children's lives is essential to creating well-functioning societies, businesses and families.

I am personally very happy to see more work being done in recent years to look at fatherhood experiences at work, assess how we can close the care gap, redefine gender-based parenting roles and change attitudes around what it means to be a man and a dad.

We've come a long way over the past couple of decades. The expectations and experiences of many new dads now are very different to what our grandads and even our own fathers encountered. My grandad never attended the birth of any of his six children. Now in many delivery rooms across the country, the father is the main birthing partner.

There are 10 times as many stay-at-home dads in the UK now than there were a decade ago. And the introduction of shared parental leave in 2015, followed by Covid-19 in 2020 – which saw more men taking on childcare responsibilities than ever before – have all helped to shift the conversation around fatherhood.

.....
“There are 10 times as many stay-at-home dads in the UK now than there were a decade ago”
.....

However, with all these developments, mothers still take on the vast majority of childcare and this contributes to many gender inequalities across society.

The large disparity in the gender pay gap comes about when the first baby is born into a family, and for us to address this, we need to support and encourage dads to share the caring load in the months and years after their baby is born. This also has huge positive benefits to outcomes for our children. Research suggests that equal paternal involvement in the early years has significant positive impacts on children's wellbeing, education and resilience.

We need to evolve the role of the father in the family. But if we are going to change fatherhood, we first need to change manhood. Masculinity is going through a significant transformation. Just a few decades ago we had clearly defined gender roles. Masculinity was largely defined by providing, protecting and strength. While elements of this still exist of course, masculinity has broadened. Now, modern men are also encouraged, and in some cases required, to be empathetic, compassionate and willing and wanting to take on caring responsibilities.

“We need to evolve the role of the father in the family. But if we are going to change fatherhood, we first need to change manhood”

However, the evolution is a messy one. Gender roles are slowly becoming more fluid, but we still face a significant resistance, and stigma around men taking on shared or primary caring roles still exists.

So how do we remove the stigma around male caring and encourage and support dads to share the caring responsibilities in their home?



I think we need to take a holistic approach that considers healthcare, childcare costs, employment and cultural expectations.

.....
“Gender roles are slowly becoming more fluid, but we still face a significant resistance, and stigma around men taking on shared or primary caring roles still exists”
.....

Let’s start with healthcare. I work with midwives and GPs within the NHS to help them to engage expectant and new dads in the pregnancy process. Unfortunately, many dads can feel alienated from this process – partly due to their own hesitancy stemming from outdated views around manhood, but also due to some of the maternity services not being set up to include them sufficiently. Engaging dads in their role as early as possible is important to ensuring they bond with their baby and play an active role in family life from the beginning. If a dad is disengaged from the start, this often carries into how caring responsibilities are distributed later. We need to engage expectant dads from day one to reduce gender inequalities.

Childcare costs in the UK are extortionate. We have the third most expensive childcare system in the world. This expense ultimately leads to parents, usually the mother, leaving work to look after the children. This reinforces gender roles and mothers also face discrimination when they try to get back into the workplace after taking time out for childcare reasons. We need to make care affordable to reduce gender inequalities.

The workplace has a huge role to play in deciding how a family shares their caring responsibilities. Poor workplace policies, a lack of flexible working and un-progressive workplace cultures can all contribute to reinforcing traditional gendered parenting roles.

I am the co-founder of the Working Dads Employer Awards which celebrates employers that are supporting working dads. There are now 29 employers in the UK who have equalised their maternity and paternity leave policies and many more that offer new dads an enhanced period of paid paternity leave. The pandemic has seen a

fundamental shift in flexible working in some industries and many leadership teams are building inclusive cultures that support dads being active in their children's lives.

However, there is so much more to do and significant challenges in site-based industries and low-income roles. We need to good paternity leave packages, inclusive workplace cultures and flexible jobs for all to reduce gender inequalities.

And then there is the challenge of breaking down cultural and societal views on manhood and fatherhood. My organisation, MusicFootballFatherhood, works to create open conversations around being a dad. We want to create safe spaces for men to talk about mental health, relationships, work, gender roles, loss and everything else.

We need to normalise conversations around fatherhood and give dads the opportunities to speak with others about how they manage their caring responsibilities. It's in doing this that we can help men to practise positive masculinity – a masculinity that centres empathy, seeks help and support, shows a range of emotions and embraces caring and fatherhood.

“We need to normalise conversations around fatherhood and give dads the opportunities to speak with others about how they manage their caring responsibilities”

I am optimistic about the future. But this work is urgent. Families are suffering. Children are getting a sub-optimal upbringing. Relationships are on the brink. And gender inequalities persist.

We have lots of work to do and there is something here for all of us to contribute towards.

Who cares? We are failing our early years workforce



Shannon Pite
Communications
and External Affairs
Director, Early Years
Alliance

“The sector is in a dire situation. The employees are stressed, the government undervalues the role and there is little sunshine on the horizon. It’s my life and passion, but I’m feeling beaten.”¹

Those were the words of one early years professional in response to an Early Years Alliance survey, conducted in October 2021, on why so many early educators are choosing to leave the workforce.

They are words that perfectly sum up the general feelings of despondency, exasperation and frustration of a sector that has long been overlooked and undervalued by government. And in the time since that survey was undertaken, things have arguably only gotten worse.

There is a wealth of research that shows just how critical the first five years of life are. For every pound invested in a child’s early years, we would need to invest £7 during their adolescence to make the same impact – and for each pound spent, the taxpayer gets a £13 return on investment. And yet for many years now, the early years sector and



.....
“For every pound invested in a child’s early years, we would need to invest £7 during their adolescence to make the same impact”
.....

the professionals that work within it have been viewed and treated as little more than babysitters.

During the 2022 Autumn Statement, Chancellor Jeremy Hunt rightly stated that “providing our children with a good education is not just an economic mission; it’s a moral mission”. However, the comments – and education investment announcements – that followed did not contain a single reference to the early years.

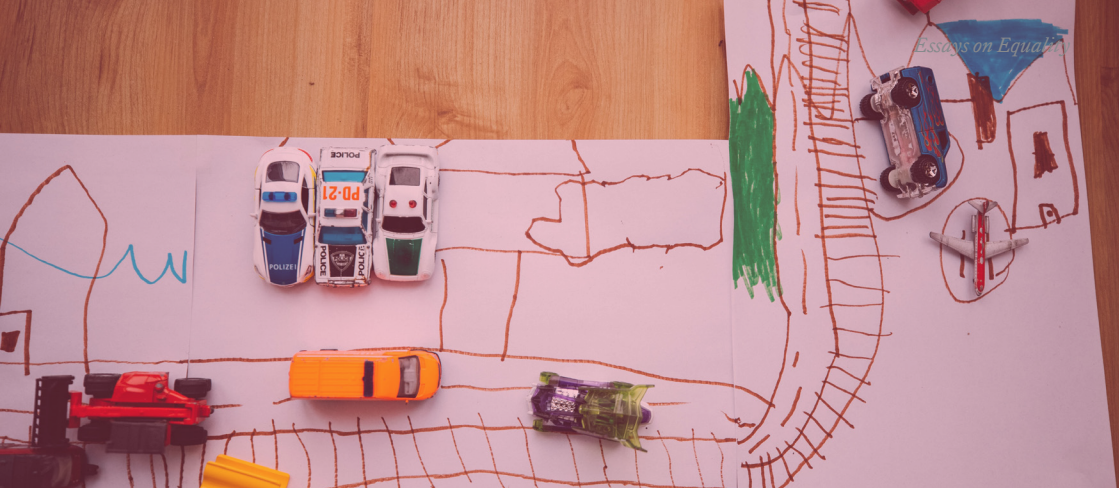
For those of us working with or in the sector, this glaring omission came as little surprise. All too often in the UK, early years provision is seen almost entirely as “childcare”, and early years settings merely as places for young children to go to be “looked after” or “watched” until pick-up time.

But early educators do so much more than this. They are education professionals who support learning during the single most critical period of brain development. They are responsible for everything from identifying when a young child has additional needs and knowing what steps to take to support them, to spotting and acting on signs of abuse or neglect and knowing which agencies to liaise with to ensure families get the help they need.

.....
“Year upon year of being dismissed by those in power is starting to take its toll”
.....

Is it any wonder that year upon year of being dismissed by those in power is starting to take its toll?

When it comes to the early years staffing crisis, much is often made of the low wages in the sector – and for good reason. A 2020 report by the Social Mobility Commission found that the average hourly wage across the early years



workforce in England – which is 97 per cent female – was just £7.42 per hour, compared to an average pay across the female workforce of £11.37.

97%
of the early years
workforce is
female

Worse still, a 2019 investigation by Nursery World magazine found that 14 per cent of those working in the sector were living in relative poverty, while research into the early years workforce published by the Education Policy Institute in 2019 found that, at the time, 45 per cent claimed state benefits or tax credits.

45%
of those working in
sector claim state
benefits or tax
credits

And yet, when the Alliance asked those actively considering leaving the early years – around a third of respondents to our October 2021 survey – why this was, the most common reason wasn't pay (though this was cited by 57 per cent of respondents); it was being undervalued by government.

14%
are living in relative
poverty

And the government's current approach to early years policy is only likely to make an already dire situation even worse. Proposals to increase the number of two-year-olds per adult in early years settings from four to five risk increasing the pressure on an already overburdened workforce for little to no gain, and further damaging morale within the sector.

In fact, in a survey of over 9,000 early years professionals carried out by the Alliance in April 2022, 75 per cent of those who would have no control over the decision on whether or not to relax ratios in their workplace said that they would leave their setting if ratios were relaxed there.

As one respondent put it: “I won’t be involved in a sector that doesn’t value its workforce and the wellbeing of the children, all for money.”

“I won’t be involved in a sector that doesn’t value its workforce and the wellbeing of the children, all for money”

Many – rightly – argue that the early years crisis is a gendered crisis. It is women who are forced to reduce their hours or leave their jobs because they cannot justify returning to work as a result of sky-high early years costs. It is women who miss out on promotions because they cannot balance increased responsibilities at work and the need to care for their children. And it is women who all too often are forced to make the incredibly difficult decision not to have a child or children because they simply cannot afford the early years costs that doing so would entail.

But it is also almost exclusively women who make up the early years workforce – and if we are going to argue that tackling the ongoing early years crisis is a gendered issue, then it is vital that these women are not forgotten.

Without these professionals, there is no early years sector. The sooner the government wakes up to this fact, the better.

Access to childcare is vital for breaking glass ceilings



John Penrose MP
*Conservative MP
and co-Chair of
the Commission on
Childcare*

The UK's childcare problem is wearily familiar to everyone. Whether it is provided for free by a non-or-part-time working partner, grandparents or friends, or from a paid-for service by a nursery or other childcare professionals, any parent with not-yet-independent children who doesn't want to put their career on hold needs access to it if they want to avoid being trapped under a particularly thick glass ceiling. A ceiling which means they are unable to work a few extra hours to improve their pay or apply for a promotion, or switch to a sector with more travel or longer and less-predictable hours if it conflicts with their caring responsibilities.

Almost everyone acknowledges that access to childcare is vital for breaking glass ceilings, whether it's for single parents and working women; for people in low-paid roles who are trying to work their way up and out of poverty; or for anyone trying to avoid becoming downwardly-mobile if their existing childcare arrangements dry up – for example, if a spouse or partner leaves, or if a grandparent dies or moves away.

So far, successive UK governments have tried to break this glass ceiling by subsidising the costs for less well-off parents, with schemes like the universal 15 hours' free childcare for all three- and four-year-olds; a further 15 hours for less well-off working parents of two- to four-year-olds; and a tax-free childcare scheme. There are also plans for high-quality wraparound holiday childcare due to be announced soon. The cost to the taxpayer of these schemes is already high – over £3.6 billion in 2020/21, for example – and, given the entire industry's difficulties with retaining staff, rising costs mean this expense is likely to increase even further in future unless something changes.

If an entire industry is hardly profitable at the same time as charging internationally high prices and struggling to retain staff, there is clearly a fundamental and structural problem

with its costs. And continuing to subsidise those costs with ever-bigger contributions from already-hard-pressed taxpayers will simply treat the symptoms rather than solving the underlying problems.

We have to find and solve the causes of these internationally high costs, so parents can find high-quality and safe childcare that isn't nearly so pricey in the first place. That's why I've launched a cross-party independent commission with the help of the Social Market Foundation to look at these underlying fundamentals. I hope we will come up with proposals to reduce costs, while still delivering a safe and enriching level of service.

.....
“We have to find and solve the causes of these internationally high costs, so parents can find high-quality and safe childcare that isn't nearly so pricey in the first place”
.....

I also hope we will look more broadly than the costs, to address the underlying reasons that created that enormously thick and opportunity-destroying glass ceiling in the first place. Genuinely flexible working that allows parents to contribute as equally valued and productive team members while juggling their caring responsibilities is something that's easy to promise, but extremely hard for many employers to deliver.

The solutions need to be varied, because what's right for a seasonal hospitality business won't work for a small construction firm, a high-pressure legal partnership or a factory that needs 24-hour shift work. There are many techniques and job designs that work well in particular industries or types of role but not in others. Plenty of public, private and third sector employers know that flexible working could help them attract and retain the very best talent, but too many of them don't have the confidence or capabilities to know what specific approaches would be right for their organisations.

Some of those answers might need new laws: for example, we might decide to split today's grossly lopsided maternity and paternity leave differently, so parents still have the same amount of overall time off between them, but each has an equal and swappable allowance, so employers have to treat



all parents equally. Or we might decide to equalise treatment for adoptive and surrogate parents to match birth parents. But plenty of the answers will need improved employment techniques instead of extra laws or red tape – one solution could be a new employment standard on how to deliver flexible working productively from the British Standards Institute (the UK’s national body responsible for producing technical standards on products, services and businesses).

However we do it, these changes would make a huge difference to both hard-working parents and to taxpayers too. It would improve social mobility and meritocracy by bringing employment within reach for many more people, particularly single parents and working women, reducing gender pay gaps and giving firms a bigger, better pool of talent to choose from when they are recruiting or promoting to fill a particular role.

It would give anyone who is ambitious but currently caught in a low-paid role a better chance at promotion and developing their career. Anyone whose childcare arrangements collapsed at short notice would have less risk of losing their job because they’d find a broader and deeper pool of affordable alternative suppliers instead. Plus, it would make an entire industry more economically productive and efficient too, while at the same time reducing burdens on taxpayers and potentially freeing up space for tax cuts in future too. What’s to dislike about that?

We can't afford to keep kicking the can down the road on childcare



Mandy Garner
Editor at Working
Mums

The UK is a world leader, but it's not a positive. According to the OECD, the UK now tops the rankings of developed nations when it comes to net childcare costs.¹ And there is no sign of that coming down any time soon.

Childcare in the UK operates differently in the different nations – for example, Scotland has recently allocated more money to cutting bills for the lowest paid.² Yet there are many broad similarities, such as subsidised schemes for three- and four-year-olds. The issue of how to make good quality childcare in the UK affordable and available in all parts of the country has been debated for many years. It has become more urgent as more mums have stayed in the workplace, increasingly working full-time hours.

.....
“According to the OECD, the UK now tops the rankings of developed nations when it comes to net childcare costs”
.....

In the early 2000s there was a big investment in childcare – Sure Start centres, some of which provide affordable early learning and full day care for pre-school children – were introduced, followed by 15 hours' free childcare for three- and four-year-olds for 38 weeks of the year. This was extended to disadvantaged two-year-olds in 2013, and in 2017 some working parents were able to claim 30 hours a week of free childcare during term time. There is also tax-free childcare whereby parents can claim back up to 20 per cent of costs through tax relief, but this has struggled to take off, although claimant numbers have been rising recently. And parents on Universal Credit can claim up to 85 per cent of their childcare costs for their first child.³

Yet still the cost of childcare is prohibitive for many and there have been concerns that the significant increase in the number of women in their 30s and 40s dropping out of the workforce in the last year may be linked to childcare costs and availability.

One major problem is that the money the government provides for “free” childcare doesn’t cover the full cost of providing a child’s place at a childcare provider. That means childcare providers have to find the difference from elsewhere, for instance, by charging extra for younger children. Through Covid, childcare providers were hard hit, although many stayed open for most of the pandemic. They had to fight hard for support from the government, which tends to treat them more as private businesses rather than education providers or essential infrastructure, despite the links between early years care and children’s long-term educational performance.

It is therefore no surprise that, unlike education, childcare was not mentioned in the government’s last budget statement. Moreover, the most recent government figures show that many parents have bypassed formal childcare altogether, often because of the expense. But what impact does that have long term? It means parents – usually women – taking lower paid, flexible, often insecure jobs to fit around what childcare they have available, moving to be near family, setting up as self-employed – but generally not making much money out of it –, taking career breaks and facing trouble getting back into the workforce at anywhere near the level of pay they had before having children. The



impact is cumulative and for that reason the gender pension gap is much greater than the gender pay gap.

There are so many different factors that are just not taken into consideration or acknowledged because women have usually taken the hit and no-one has cared to notice them. It is left to individuals to manage the situation in a band aid approach to getting through the week. The whole thing is absolutely exhausting and pushes many parents to the brink in so many ways.

“It is left to individuals to manage the situation in a band aid approach to getting through the week”

Organisations like the Women’s Budget Group have long argued that childcare – be that pre-school care or wraparound schools care – should be considered essential infrastructure, similar to roads and public transport, but so far the only response from the UK government has been tweaks to the existing, broken system. The main plank of the government’s current policy is to change the ratios between staff and children for childcare providers. Campaigners argue that that would reduce safety and do little to bring down childcare bills. That is because any savings would need to be ploughed back in to cover rising expenses, including staffing costs.

The government has also mooted childminding agencies as a solution to plummeting childminder numbers, but since they were first introduced in 2014 the number of childminders has been dropping faster than all other forms of childcare.⁴ There are currently just seven childminder agencies in England,⁵ mostly based in the wealthier South East. Meanwhile, the rate of closure of nurseries has risen as a result of Covid and childcare availability is very patchy. Are childminding agencies going to provide a national solution to the problem of affordable, quality childcare?

Childcare providers have been calling for more investment for years – the UK spends a very low proportion of its GDP on early years in comparison to countries like France. It tends to be the smaller providers, often in disadvantaged areas, that are going to the wall. Chains can cover the risk better by funding childcare in disadvantaged communities with profits from richer areas, but childcare needs to be considered an integral part of the community to ensure its sustainability. For this to happen it needs to be valued more – not just by central but also local government who face difficult financial choices as their budgets are squeezed.

We need to see a proper assessment of the value of childcare – not just in broad monetary terms, but in terms of the lifetime impact on people's life chances. The UK cannot simply afford to keep kicking the care can further down the road.

Parenting in a warzone



Waad Al-Kateab
*Journalist and
Oscar-nominated
documentary
filmmaker*

I found out I was pregnant with Taima, my second daughter, in mid-September 2016. At that time, my home – East Aleppo – had been besieged for 62 days by the Assad regime forces, and their Russian and Iranian allies. We did not know how long the siege would last, nor whether we'd survive it. Death was a daily occurrence, and basic goods such as fruit, vegetables, baby milk and even medicine were not available. We were completely cut off from the rest of the world.

I remember that I started waking up feeling sick, and weak. I thought it was my body's reaction to the lack of vitamins and fresh food. After all, we could only eat pasta or rice every single day. But then a nurse looked at me weirdly and said, "You look like a pregnant woman. Are you hiding any good news?". Her words came to me like a shock. I started thinking about my morning sickness, and I knew it: I am pregnant.

Just a few minutes later, I went downstairs to the midwife who confirmed it through the ultrasound, and I rushed, crying to Hamza, my husband, who was a doctor and the manager of the hospital where we were living. I started throwing so many questions at him: Why has this happened now? What should I do? How can I protect the baby? How can I feed the baby when I am not able to protect or feed our first, Sama, who is six months' old now? I cannot even protect or feed myself!

**"Why has this happened now? What should I do?
How can I protect the baby?"**

As the days passed, every single second was a challenge. The shelling was relentless as the regime, supported by Russian forces, escalated its military operations and started taking over more areas. The siege was closing in tighter on us, and I often thought we would not survive it. I was



A scene from *For Sama*. Photograph: Waad Al-Kateab

terrified of losing the baby as much as I was scared of giving birth inside the siege.

Then, in December 2016, it all came to an end with a scenario we had never expected, nor wanted: forced displacement. It crushed us, and we were in shock, with no time to really understand what was about to happen to us, or to say our goodbyes to anything properly.

.....

“I was terrified of losing the baby as much as I was scared of giving birth inside the siege”

.....

I was, however, able to go to my house – the first home my husband and I created as a family. I cried all my tears there as I remembered how five years earlier I was standing with hundreds of students in Aleppo university, chanting for freedom.

What followed was a systematic strategy of annihilation put forth by the Assad regime: cluster bombs, barrel bombs, chemicals – everything was used to destroy the areas outside of its control, and the people in there that stood up for dignity. The siege and its “surrender or starve” policy had hit other Syrian cities

before ours (and others have followed later), resulting in population transfers that were labelled as “evacuations”. And now our home, the places we were fond of, our friends buried there, our whole life and memories were being taken away from us. I did not want to leave but we were not given a choice.

.....
“Our whole life and memories were being taken away from us. I did not want to leave but we were not given a choice”
.....

Hamza, Sama and I survived, even though the trauma was so deep that it reduced any other pain as trivial. Yet, five months after our displacement I felt I was able to restore something so immense and precious inside of me, when my beautiful baby, Taima, was born, safe and healthy, even though in exile.

As with every Syrian baby who was born in Turkey, she had no formal papers and the only one I had was from the hospital, stating the birth of a healthy girl – albeit nameless. We put enormous effort into trying to register her at the Syrian embassy in Istanbul, and back in Syria through a lawyer, and other ways too. But there was no

A scene from *For Sama*. Photograph: Waad Al-Kateab



luck due the Assad regime demanding us to go back to Syria to do it in person, which was impossible for us – if we were to go, they would have easily arrested us, or killed us directly.

Taima was only one year old when we had to leave her in Turkey, while Hamza, Sama and I left for the UK to apply for asylum. Once again, we were in a situation where every choice meant heartbreak and, at the same time, it didn't even feel like we had an actual choice at all. It took five months to be able to reunite with her and finally have her back with us in the new home that we were starting to create.

I often stand at the door of my daughters' bedroom now, watching them as they sleep – like angels, peacefully – and I cannot help thinking of the blessing of such a simple moment, after all we have been through. And how much responsibility I have: to carry on and to keep telling the world about what happened to us and what has not ceased to happen to others.

When my documentary, *For Sama*, was released, the reaction from the public was astonishing. People's emotions paved the way for understanding, solidarity and a sincere desire to do something about it: "What can we do?" they'd ask, as the lights would go back on in theatres. Action for Sama, the impact campaign that my husband and I founded shortly after, carries our efforts toward an answer to that question.

The campaign calls for accountability for the war crimes committed in Syria and fosters a deeper understanding of the events that caused millions to flee, told by the ones who lived them. It is also a way for everyone who wishes to stand by us, and support our fight for a different, brighter future – for my daughters and all the Syrian children, for all of us who still dream to go back to a free Syria, one day.

Childcare in England: building the coalition to change it for good



Bridget Phillipson MP
*Shadow Secretary of
State for Education*

Childcare in England is broken. Broken for children, broken for parents, broken for workers and employers alike. Parents spend more on childcare in England than in almost any other developed country.¹ We have a patchwork of provision, introduced at a variety of times and for a range of purposes, but taken together, it doesn't deliver the service we need.

Why is that? Part of it is simply historic. The contours of Britain's social security system – the National Health Service, an updated National Insurance system – were laid down in the immediate post-war era,² a time when family structures and economics were very different.³ Although Labour governments since then have done much to augment and update the systems of benefits and services – above all through the introduction of Sure Start – successive Conservative governments have closed over a thousand of the Sure Start centres in England that Labour bequeathed in 2010.⁴ Remaining childcare provision for pre-school years is an uneasy hybrid of provision explicitly designed to help children, and provision explicitly designed to help their parents.

“Childcare in England is broken. Broken for children, broken for parents, broken for workers and employers alike”

Sure Start's failure to survive a change of government contrasts powerfully with the status of the National Health Service in UK politics as an enduring and politically untouchable service, once described dismissively by a Conservative Chancellor as “the closest thing the English people have to a religion”.⁵ That contrast speaks to one of the hardest challenges facing us: how to make sure that “changing childcare for good” really means both better outcomes for families and a transformation that endures.

But it is by no means the only difficult challenge. Even the words we used to describe the problem are hotly contested. I have lost count of the number of occasions on which I have started to talk, in the language parents use, about how we improve things, and I have been taken to task for failing to be clear about whether I want to improve outcomes for parents or for children, or for using the term childcare when I should be talking about early years education.

A tendency for those closest to any issue to have strong views on how best to talk about their work is hardly unique to education, but too often the wider politics gets obscured. The challenge for politicians is not simply to determine policy and priorities, but to speak to electors about them, and to build coalitions to back them: to bring people together so as to deliver change that commands support. There are many, many improvements to the current system that would be good news for children and good news for parents alike. Our politics needs to make sure any fork in the road is in the distance, not the foreground.

What's more, childcare as a challenge for families – even admitting the imperfection of the term – is not merely a matter of provision in the early years. It isn't just our



social security system that was built in an earlier age, but our school year – organised around the labour needs of agriculture – and our school day, which is quite distinct from the working day of parents’ lives.⁶

The broader conception of childcare, as an issue that faces parents of children from the end of parental leave through to the end of primary school, roughly to the age of 11, is also crucial to the electoral politics of childcare.

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“For many families,
the costs of
childcare... take up
considerably more
of a family budget
than food or housing
costs”
.....

For many families, the costs of childcare – understood as including breakfast clubs for children at primary school, as well as after school activities – take up considerably more of a family budget than food or housing costs.⁷ That broader conception fits well with what US Secretary of the Treasury, Janet Yellen, has called “modern supply side economics”.⁸ Better childcare and better education for children throughout their early years is good for parents, employers, and skills availability in the short term, and good for education and skills into the much longer term.

In achieving the change we need, the timing of the electoral cycle doesn’t always help. If you allow for two to three years for a system to be rolled out in government – if you focus purely at the pre-school space – future beneficiaries haven’t seen the need yet, and as for those electors who would benefit right now, they and their children will be past that stage by the time the policy is in force.

That’s why it’s crucial we think about the whole of the time in a child’s early life, from the end of parental leave – which Labour plans to reform⁹ – through to the end of primary school. And in the life of the family, too; through every working day, and through every school holiday. More than that, this is also the way to build and brand the coalition for change. That’s why, when I set out the first step towards the modern childcare system we will build at Labour’s conference in 2022,¹⁰ I didn’t start with the early years: I started with services for school age children. They and their parents need to be beneficiaries too, of a system to be

understood as a service for every child and every family, for the decade in children's lives where education makes the most difference.

And building a wider coalition to include those who deliver the services as well as the families who use them must also be part of how we ensure a better system endures. One of the great ironies of the history of our National Health Service is that the British Medical Association did its level best to destroy the NHS before it came into existence,¹¹ and yet within a generation, the BMA went on to become one of its most determined defenders at a time of sustained attack from a Conservative government.¹² The lesson to learn is that the NHS as a lasting political fact has owed much to its breadth, touching so many lives in so many ways; its status as a service there not just for some but for all; and to the institutions which have grown around it and accommodated to its success, from the trades unions to the medical schools and the Royal Colleges, which do not flinch from its defence.

Around the world, the time has come for change on childcare. Australian Labor put childcare at the heart of their federal election campaign messaging in 2022.¹³ In Canada the government is pressing ahead with a new national cap on costs.¹⁴ Even in the United States, President Biden's initial package to Congress would have transformed childcare in America for every working family.¹⁵

“Around the world, the time has come for change on childcare”

I am determined that the ambition Labour had in the 1940s to build a better society, fit for our values and the time, is ambition we match today. Our children are born into a country with a proud history, but they deserve a bright future too.

The global picture: what can we learn from childcare systems from around the world?



Lizzie Ville
Senior Policy and
Research Officer at
the Fawcett Society

The Fawcett Society's recent poll for Equal Pay Day found over a third of women would like to work more paid hours, but a lack of affordable childcare is a major barrier.¹ A world-class childcare system would allow adults to make truly free, informed choices about parenthood and work, while providing children with a strong foundation for their futures during the most critical stage of development. Yet the UK system falls short: a complex picture of childcare entitlements – including government-funded hours, tax-free childcare, and Universal Credit – do not sufficiently cover many parents' fees. Furthermore, early years professionals earn on average less than the National Living Wage² and years of insufficient funding has destabilised providers' finances,^{3,4} placing the quality of childcare at risk.

The issue is, of course, highly gendered. Women's paid and unpaid labour props up society and our economic systems – as the majority of the childcare workforce, and as partners and mothers continuing to hold the biggest share of domestic and child-raising responsibility. Without affordable and accessible childcare, women face a gender pay gap amid



a worsening cost of living crisis, while people of all genders face impossible and unfair decisions surrounding work and parenthood. Reform is urgently needed.

Looking to other countries can provide a useful starting point. Many studies have focussed on the childcare systems of Nordic countries, where generous policies accompany greater female participation in the labour force and lower gender pay gaps.⁵ However, the Nordic models of tax and spending are very different from those in the UK. Instead, in our July 2022 report, the Fawcett Society investigated childcare in five comparable “liberal welfare states” – Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, and Switzerland.⁶ For each country, we reviewed current childcare policy and explored its relationship to women’s labour market and child development outcomes.

“A world-class childcare system would allow adults to make truly free, informed choices about parenthood and work... Yet the UK system falls short”

We found that several countries are introducing large-scale reforms to childcare policy. Canada is implementing universal low-cost childcare, planning huge investment and a reduction in parent fees to \$10 per day on average.⁷ This seismic change was built on decades of campaigning, and catalysed by pandemic lockdowns and centre closures highlighting the critical and fragile nature of services. The principles of change began in Quebec, which has had low-cost universal childcare since the late 1990s, with dramatic increases in women’s labour force participation rates.⁸

Japan saw similarly large-scale reform in 2019 – to incentivise its residents to have children amid falling birth rates, the country introduced free childcare for three-to-five-year-olds and zero-to-two-year-olds from low-income families. Australia and Switzerland are also making change on a smaller scale by increasing subsidies for parents.



.....
“Until recently the UK government was proposing to worsen staff-child ratios... This would have meant fewer staff per child in settings which are already struggling for resources”
.....

By contrast, until recently the UK government was proposing to worsen staff-child ratios as a means of cutting costs. This would have meant fewer staff per child in settings which are already struggling for resources, with childcare organisations highlighting funding levels below the cost of delivery⁹ and a worker retention crisis.¹⁰ Staff wages for childcare workers in the UK are very low – the lowest of the countries we compared and less than the National Living Wage on average.¹¹ Changing ratios would put extra strain on an under-resourced, under-compensated workforce, of which women form the vast majority – 96 per cent.¹² Moreover, sufficient staff-child ratios are necessary for supporting children at a critical developmental stage, with effects of early experiences impacting lives for years to come.¹³

For parents, childcare is unaffordable in the UK, seeing the highest fees of the countries we compared and proportionally higher costs for lower income families.¹⁴ Funded hours are available for three-to-four-year-olds, and two-year-olds from low-income families, but are unavailable for younger children and only cover term time – while countries like

New Zealand offer year-round free childcare. Tax-free childcare sees low take-up, and the childcare element of Universal Credit is paid via reimbursement, leaving parents out of pocket or unable to access childcare – however, in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, subsidies go straight to the childcare provider.

Affordability is crucial: international evidence demonstrates that it increases women’s labour market participation significantly,^{15,16} while 1.7 million women in the UK are unable to take on more work due to childcare issues.¹⁷ Affordable childcare would also allow women to make truly free choices about the division of caring responsibilities – an essential step in closing the gender pay gap.

“Affordable childcare would also allow women to make truly free choices about the division of caring responsibilities – an essential step in closing the gender pay gap”

To achieve this while maintaining high-quality services, we need substantial investment, but UK public spending on childcare is just 0.6 per cent of GDP, the lowest of the countries we reviewed, bar Switzerland.¹⁸ Investment in childcare provides large economic returns,¹⁹ through unlocking the potential of women shut out of the labour market.

For England to have a world-class childcare system that benefits both parents and children – allowing parents to work, and children to build the foundations for their future – we urgently need wholesale reforms that address quality, affordability, and fair pay and conditions for the early years workforce. We must value the work that women do.

The challenges of becoming a parent as a queer person



Stacey Stevenson
CEO, Family Equality

How do our communities and governments define “family”? One textbook definition of family is “a group of people related by birth, marriage, or adoption”. While that definition doesn’t capture all types of families, it hints at something lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others (LGBTQ+) folks know all too well: families are found, formed, and chosen. No matter how we create and grow our families – through birth, marriage, adoption, or any of the infinite paths to parenthood for our community – LGBTQ+ people face obstacles along the way.

As a Black queer person raising twin boys with my wife in the United States, my family and our needs are not always recognised or valued by society. While we’re happy and thriving now, it’s taken a lot of hard work and, at times,

“As a Black queer person raising twin boys with my wife in the United States, my family and our needs are not always recognised or valued by society”



heartache to get to build our family. I know I'm not alone in my experience of becoming a parent.

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"LGBTQ+ parents
may be vulnerable
to discrimination or
retribution on their
path to parenthood"
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According to a survey by Family Equality – the leading US organisation that works to protect and advance the freedoms of LGBTQ+ parents and families – the number of LGBTQ+-headed families in the United States is set to grow dramatically in the coming years. ¹ 3.8 million LGBTQ+ millennials are considering expanding their families in the coming years, and 2.9 million are actively planning to do so. The gap in parenthood rates and plans to become parents between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ people are narrowing, with only a 7 per cent difference among millennials. Additionally, the number of same-sex couple households in the US exceeded one million for the first time in 2021, according to the United States Census Bureau.²

Queer parents around the globe face unique and multifaceted issues that make raising a family with children more difficult than their straight counterparts. And the differences begin with becoming parents in the first place.

Adoption, foster care, surrogacy, and assisted reproductive technology are ways queer people can add children to their families. But some laws, policies, and discriminatory practices get in the way. Depending on the law, LGBTQ+ parents may be vulnerable to discrimination or retribution on their path to parenthood. This is especially true for transgender parents who have historically faced discrimination in the courts, custody disputes, foster care, and adoption. Parenting and foster and adoption laws, practices, and procedures vary throughout the US. Some states in the US and many countries around the world do not have express protections for LGBTQ+ parents, which means that hopeful parents who are looking to adopt or foster children are too often barred by adoption and foster agencies.

With over 400,000 children entering the US foster care system every year, 120,000 eligible for adoption, and approximately 20,000 who age out each year without ever finding a forever home, agencies who discriminate are doing a disservice to the children they serve. LGBTQ+ people and same-sex couples are more likely to adopt and foster children, compared to their non-LGBTQ counterparts. Specifically, same-sex couples are seven times more likely to foster or adopt than different-sex couples.³ The children deserve to be placed in loving homes.

In addition to laws, policies, and outright discrimination in adoption and foster care, a lack of healthcare equality can be a barrier for hopeful parents as well. They may face discrimination by a physician who refuses to provide reproductive assistance for an LGBTQ+ person or couple. Some employers' health insurance coverage may not offer the same reproductive assistance for an LGBTQ+ person that they offer a heterosexual person. This can make it difficult for queer individuals and their families to access the care and services they need, and can also put a significant financial burden on them.

“My wife and I were initially denied the right to become parents. Over and over again. We were turned away by doctors. We were turned away from adoption agencies. We felt ridiculed, and at times, hopeless”

Becoming a parent was a dream of mine and it is the most important role that I'll ever have in my life. Yet with all our longing, resources, and a stable home, my wife and I were initially denied the right to become parents. Over and over again. We were turned away by doctors. We were turned away from adoption agencies. We felt ridiculed, and at times, hopeless.

We fought hard to become parents. We cried. We thought of giving up. But thankfully we didn't give up. We are the proud parents of beautiful twin boys. We kept pushing

through the barriers. But I know that's not the experience of many.

Parenthood is one of the greatest joys and most fulfilling experiences a human being can experience. It's a deep longing for many, and a right that everyone who desires it should have – including queer people.



It's time to abolish China's three-child policy



Yaqiu Wang
Senior China
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Human Rights Watch

For 35 years – from 1980 to 2015 – the Chinese government maintained a one-child policy, subjecting millions of women to forced contraception, forced sterilisation, and forced abortion. Now, because of plummeting birth rates, the government desperately wants women in the country to have more children.¹ Since 2016, the authorities moved swiftly from a one- to two- to three-child policy. These changes were buttressed with tax cuts, subsidies, cash rewards and other incentives, and laced with propaganda about the virtue and duty of having more children.²

But none of these have worked well so far: China's birth rate continues to drop. The total fertility rate decreased from 2.6 in the late 1980s to just 1.15 in 2021. In fact, in 2022 the population might have declined for the first time since the Great Famine of 1959 to 1961, according to a projection by the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences.³

When the government announced the three-child policy in June 2021, it was met with widespread cynicism online. "I'm not buying three Rolls-Royces not because there's any restriction, but because they're expensive," a post on the

Photograph: Reuters



Chinese social media platform Weibo read. “I want to sell my quota to rich people,” wrote another.⁴

But for women in China, a significant additional reason for their unwillingness to have more children is the unequal burden of childcare responsibilities they would shoulder and its potential detrimental impact on their career.

When the two-child policy was in effect – from 2016 to 2021 – a popular internet saying described the impossible position working women in China faced: “If you haven’t had children, employers regard you as an ‘extra-large time bomb’ that will explode twice [take maternity leave twice]. If you’ve had one child, you’re a ‘time bomb’ likely to have a second child at any time. If you already have two children, you must be too busy taking care of the children so [you] can’t focus on work”.⁵

No wonder few women want a third child even now that they can. According to a 2022 online survey of professional women by the job search website Zhilian Zhaopin, only 0.8 per cent of respondents said they wanted to have three children.⁶

The same study reported that 61 per cent of surveyed female job applicants – compared with 32 per cent of male applicants – said they had been asked about their childbearing or childrearing status by potential employers. Over 38 per cent of surveyed women said their career prospects were negatively affected by marriage and childrearing, while only 18 per cent of men reported the same.⁷

A 2020 study on the impact of family planning policy changes on urban women by the Women’s Studies Institute of China reported that 45 per cent of respondents said their employment was negatively affected by pregnancy or childrearing. Over one-third reported income loss, and more than 20 per cent described losing opportunities for training or promotions. Another 13 per cent said they were fired or forced to resign, and eight per cent said they experienced demotion.⁸

61%

of female job applicants were asked about their childbearing status by potential employers

45%

of women said their employment was negatively affected by having children

13%

of women were forced to resign after having children



Maternity matrons learn to take care of babies during training classes in Beijing in 2015. Photograph: AP

A major driver of pregnancy-based discrimination is that companies do not want to take on an employee who might be absent during the three to six months of maternity leave, and the costs associated with hiring a replacement. Mothers in China have much longer mandatory parental leave than fathers – and in some regions, fathers have none at all.⁹

Another factor underpinning this grim reality for women is the traditional and deeply discriminatory gender roles and practices: women are primarily responsible for childcare

in their families and are expected to subordinate career aspirations to these family obligations. A 2015 study by Renmin University in China showed that, among families with a child or the youngest child under three, 63 per cent had the mother as the primary caregiver, while 32 per cent had the grandparents playing that role. The percentage of families in which the father was the primary caregiver was exceedingly low.¹⁰ According to a 2019 study by

the National Bureau of Statistics, on average, women in China spent three hours and 48 minutes per day on unpaid domestic work, which includes childcare, almost three times

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“Women are primarily responsible for childcare in their families and are expected to subordinate career aspirations to these family obligations”
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more than men, who spent one hour and 32 minutes on average.¹¹

The Chinese government has in recent years taken some actions to assist women in the workplace. In November, the government amended the Women's Rights and Interests Protection Law, the highest law concerning gender equality in the country, for the first time in nearly 30 years. Among the provisions to combat gender discrimination in the workplace, the law banned employers from inquiring or investigating the marital and maternal status of female job applicants or making such status a condition for employment.

“Birth limits, no matter the number, are fundamentally an infringement on women’s reproductive rights and bodily autonomy”

While laws and regulations with similar provisions already exist, elevating them into the Women's Protection Law, which took effect in January 2023, will hopefully strengthen enforcement, which has been poor so far.¹² And in August 2022, 17 central government agencies jointly issued a notice outlining the government's plan to increase the birth rate, with one of the major measures being increasing government-sponsored childcare facilities and services.¹³

These are positive steps, but the government needs to go further. It should develop programmes to reduce discriminatory gender norms related to childcare responsibilities, end discriminatory parental leave policies, expand parental leave policies and protections for both men and women who wish to take it, and ensure availability and affordability of childcare and other forms of professional caregiving. And most importantly, the government must abolish the three-child policy because birth limits, no matter the number, are fundamentally an infringement on women's reproductive rights and bodily autonomy.

Stuck on the ladder: is there a part-time penalty for working parents?



Simon Kelleher
Head of Policy
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Working Families

The 2022 Working Families Index (WFI), produced by Working Families and Talking Talent, had some very encouraging news for flexibly working parents. The findings of the study point to flexible working actively supporting the career progression of parents and carers in the UK. While it would be tempting to chalk this up as a clear win, further analysis of the WFI data, conducted by the Global Institute for Women's Leadership, tells a more complex story and lays bare the gender inequality when it comes to flex.



Caitlin Schmid
Research Fellow at
the Global Institute
for Women's
Leadership

While the WFI showed a similar number of men and women working flexibly (71 per cent and 69 per cent respectively), men were shown to have greater access to location flexibility (71 per cent versus 61 per cent), most likely due to their concentration in professional service industries, where 83 per cent work remotely or with a hybrid arrangement. By contrast, women's overrepresentation in industries less suited to hybrid or remote working, such as care, retail and education, puts them on the backfoot for location flexibility.

Limited access to location flexibility puts parents, particularly mothers, in a difficult position. Previous research shows that a lack of location or schedule flexibility can force mothers to reduce their working hours in order to balance childcare.

The WFI found that parents with flexible working arrangements reported higher rates of career progression than those not working flexibly. With 51 per cent of mothers reporting moderate to significant levels of career progression, compared with 38 per cent who didn't work flexibly, it is safe to say that flexible working can support women to climb the career ladder. However, the playing field is far from level. Gender differences are evident among flex workers, with men working flexibly exhibiting higher career progression than their female counterparts while part-time workers – the majority of whom are women – reported the least progression.



When it comes to flexible working and career progression, it appears that not all flex is created equal – workers with location and schedule flexibility experience far more career progression than those working reduced hours. And as women are more than twice as likely to work reduced hours than men, this is a deeply gendered issue.

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“Parents with flexible working arrangements reported higher rates of career progression than those not working flexibly”
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So are working parents, particularly mothers, facing a part-time penalty? In short, yes. To address this imbalance, more effort is needed to support the career advancement of part-time workers, and ensure women working reduced hours don’t continue to fall behind.

But what is it about part-time working that is holding parents back? Regularly working additional hours was found to be widespread among all respondents to the WFI, but especially among flexible workers. This points to evidence of the “flexibility paradox” described by Professor Heejung Chung, whereby workers feel a pressure to work additional hours in return for the “favour” of working flexibly. The only group who weren’t regularly working additional hours in our survey were part-time workers, arguably because they work reduced

hours to accommodate caring responsibilities. The apparent association between working additional hours and career progression suggests that women working part-time are lagging behind because of a work culture that seems to expect and reward regular (and generally unpaid) overtime.

“Women working part-time are lagging behind because of a work culture that seems to expect and reward regular (and generally unpaid) overtime”

The gendered division of unpaid labour and deficits in care services certainly play a role in explaining women’s greater part-time engagement and low career progression. We are witnessing a fragmentation of the labour force, whereby women with caring responsibilities and no access to location or schedule flexibility are driven to take different career tracks, to their detriment. Yet, there is a more systemic issue here: career progression should not depend on regular overtime. Cultural and organisational change is needed if we are to end the penalisation of part-time workers, predominantly women, and challenge the culture of working excessively long hours, which isn’t in anybody’s interest.

The promise of change is on the horizon for UK parents and carers, in the form of the upcoming Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Bill. A welcome policy that will ultimately give employees the right to request flexible working from day one of their employment, and usher in a requirement for employers to consult with employees if a flexible working request cannot be accommodated, a discussion which may allow alternative options to be explored.

While more legislative change is required to make flexible working the default, there is much that employers can do to ensure the best chance of a fair and flexible future. Designing and advertising jobs with an element of flexibility, celebrating flexible workers, promoting and developing staff who work flexibly, monitoring pay and progression of part-

time and flexible workers, as well as tracking work patterns by gender and type of flex, are all ways employers can support flexible workers to advance in their careers.

But employers can also help to manage workloads so that employees are not regularly working excessive hours. Employers should ensure that jobs are “human-sized”, and should be realistic with their expectations, working in collaboration with employees to set workloads. Setting ways of working that include employees taking regular breaks and not feeling pressured to respond to emails outside working hours can also help set clearer boundaries between work and home life. And a shift to measuring performance by results rather than where and when work is undertaken shows trust in employees.

.....
“There is a danger that the invisible barriers to career progression for part-time workers will simply perpetuate existing gender inequalities”
.....

As we edge slowly toward change, flexible working presents an opportunity to create more diverse workforces and better balanced lives.

But a fundamental shift in which variety of work patterns is the accepted norm, and all are treated with equal status, cannot occur without robust policy and public investment in high-quality and accessible care services, bolstered by supportive cultures and organisations. Without this, there is a danger that the invisible barriers to career progression for part-time workers will simply perpetuate existing gender inequalities.

Lessons from Australia: how family-friendly policies support gender equality



Emma Walsh
Founder and Chief
Executive Officer of
Parents At Work

Internationally, the Covid-19 pandemic saw a collision of work and care that dramatically exposed the conflict families have long battled, which suddenly became starkly visible to their employers.

Through lockdowns, school closures, and disruptions to childcare and other formal care settings, the business case to engage in the “who cares” conversation shot into focus. Without the usual care settings available to families, how could employers expect much – if anything – from their people stretched beyond capacity performing vital caring responsibilities?

But these work life pressures have always been there. It’s just that such caring responsibilities have been mostly invisible to workplaces, and largely managed by women.

The ongoing shift to mainstream hybrid working continues to blur the boundaries between work and home life. The popular rise of flexible working is forcing a rethink for businesses on the important role they play in addressing the challenges facing working parents. Many see the writing on the wall – they must respond with policies that address work life conflict, or risk failing to attract the talent they need.

The rise of the family-friendly agenda

Australia ranks equal first in the world for women’s education attainment, but 70th for economic participation and opportunity, according to the World Economic Forum. Minimal paid parental leave, a lack of accessible and affordable childcare, the gender pay gap and inflexible work practices, have all played a part in creating this imbalance.

But since the onset of the pandemic, we’ve seen dramatic shifts in some workplaces willing to invest in adopting more “family-friendly” policies which, hopefully, will have a real impact on accelerating workforce participation progress, as



well as improving wellbeing outcomes for employees and their families.

In May 2022, the newly elected Labor government committed a \$5.4 billion investment to help parents and carers with childcare costs from mid-2023. Also prioritised was an extension to the government-funded paid parental leave scheme to move from 18 weeks to 26 weeks by 2026. Critically, adding greater ability for more families to access the scheme and more flexibility incentives for fathers to participate in sharing the leave.

Importantly, there is a growing understanding that employers are critical in this system of paid parental leave. By offering their own policies to support families, employers complement the government-funded system and there's a co-contribution effect. This matters, because it sends a clear signal from organisations to their employees that sharing the caring load is something they recognise, prioritise and understand that we need to work together to address.

For too long, caring responsibilities have long been seen as the individual's burden to sort out around their work, which has priority.

Employer solutions

The renewed investment from government comes as employers have been steadfastly moving ahead on creating more “family-friendly” environments – particularly through providing gender neutral paid parental leave, flexible work and other provisions.

Some of the country’s largest employers now offer up to six months of paid parental leave to all new parents, regardless of whether they are mothers or fathers, adopting parents, or bringing a new child into their lives through surrogacy. Encouragingly, there’s a trend towards removing “primary” and “secondary” carer labels from paid parental leave policies. Some employers also go further, offering miscarriage leave for those experiencing pregnancy loss, and fertility leave for those undergoing fertility treatment.

These employers have been moving well beyond what’s been offered via the government-funded scheme due to the inadequacies of the system. While many point to it being morally the “right thing to do”, they don’t shy away from there being a clear economic business case to do so.

There is strong evidence that family-friendly workplace practices enhance talent attraction and retention and reduce



employee turnover, with associated reduced costs to the organisation. Paid parental leave is only one piece to being family-friendly, also key is real flexibility, and other forms of leave to support care (like elder care).

.....
“There is strong evidence that family-friendly workplace practices enhance talent attraction and retention and reduce employee turnover”
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We’ve seen studies showing that such initiatives are an effective and concise predictor of employee productivity, while also contributing to improved diversity and inclusion – such as for employing Indigenous Australians – with many citing inflexible work hours and leave arrangements as being a key reason for leaving a role, according to Diversity Council Australia research.¹ Deloitte’s 2022 Gen Z and Millennial

Survey² found that work-life integration and flexibility is among the strongest differentiators of candidate choice for these younger generations. There are further studies showing flexibility contributes to knowledge creation, sharing and exploitation,³ and others again highlighting how paid parental leave improves brand equity and reinforces company values.⁴

What can we learn from the Australian experience?

Internationally, research shows there are cultural and financial barriers preventing men from embracing family-friendly practices that support them to share the caring load.

The expectations placed on men and women in the workplace are vastly different when it comes to flexibility, part-time work, and especially parental leave. It speaks volumes that men’s hours of paid work remain largely unchanged when they become fathers, whereas women’s hours dramatically reduce when they become mothers and many never recover their earning potential.⁵

Meanwhile, statistics reveal that women are working more than ever, but they still do the lion’s share of most household and caring responsibilities, including almost double the unpaid work of men.⁶

Pervasive gender norms around caring for children mean it has long been treated as a “woman’s job”, one that is unpaid and seen as a duty. Often referred to as the motherhood penalty, the ripple effect this has on workforce participation, gender equality, financial security, health outcomes and family relationships for women and their children can have a lifelong and devastating impact.

Employers, along with governments, must intentionally aim to address these gender norms through policies and incentives. Without such change, the cycle will merely continue. But where do you start? How can employers know how to create meaningful change?

The way forward

We need to support parents and carers through every career and life stage, making sure that policies support both to manage caring responsibilities.

In Australia, the Family-friendly Workplaces initiative has set *National Work + Family Standards* that help employers change the status quo in the workplace via a certification and action plan. The Standards directly address the barriers women, men and gender-diverse people face balancing work and family life, and particularly women in progressing their career, and men in being able to embrace caring responsibilities.

So far more than 80 employers have been certified, meaning more than a quarter of a million workers are covered and have access to flexible work practices, paid parental leave and other policies that support themselves, and their families.

These standards provide a clear benchmark for employers to follow, so we can get more employees across the country working for organisations that intentionally aim to reduce work and family conflict while also acknowledging that care is not the responsibility of women alone.

Workplaces must accept that the future of work needs to be more family-friendly if we truly want to achieve gender equality at work and at home.

Childcare services in sub-Saharan Africa are not fit for purpose



Patricia Wekulo
Associate Research
Scientist at the
African Population
and Health Research
Centre

The early childhood period is a critical window of opportunity as interventions provided at this time have the potential to positively impact future outcomes. It is imperative that caregivers of young children ensure that the care they provide promotes children's good health, provides adequate nutrition, and enhances responsive caregiving practices, opportunities for early learning, and security and safety. However, for many children, particularly those living in sub-Saharan Africa, the multiple risks that they face, including poor health, inadequate nutrition and lack of stimulating environments, may result in them not achieving optimal development.

Many African cities are urbanising rapidly as more families choose to move from rural to urban areas in search of better economic opportunities. More likely than not, these families will end up in the less developed sections of the city, with few amenities available and poor infrastructure. With this rapid urbanisation comes the need for more economic resources at the household level necessitating the contribution of all the adult members of the household.



As more women are forced to join the workforce, and with rapidly diminishing social support options – mainly in the form of alternative care provided by members of the extended family – there is a clear and urgent need for paid childcare services.¹ Women who engage in paid labour are faced with a double burden of care because of the gendered nature of childcare responsibilities, which fall disproportionately on them. Our studies at the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) have illustrated that, in addition to the unequal burden that women bear in assuming childcare responsibilities, those who are working are likely to be engaged in the informal sector where they do not require professional skills, have no job tenure, must endure poor work environments, and do not have a statutory right to maternity leave.²

“Women who engage in paid labour are faced with a double burden of care because of the gendered nature of childcare responsibilities, which fall disproportionately on them”

The World Bank has recently published a report which estimates that, globally, nearly 350 million children under the age of three years need childcare services.³ However, the childcare sector remains largely ignored by many governments because it is not clear which ministry should be responsible for this sector; much of the childcare service provision is through privately-run facilities; and the care of young children is largely perceived to be the responsibility of women. Moreover, the perception that children under the age of three years should be at home with their parents further seems to preclude the need for the government to take up the responsibility of provision of childcare services.

A study carried out by the APHRC has shown that access to quality childcare brings a plethora of short- and long-term benefits for children, families, and society as a whole.⁴ It empowers mothers and brings about a boost in women’s participation in the workforce. This leads to better quality



Photograph: In Pictures Ltd./Corbis

employment, which brings higher income and productivity, better job security, and more formal sector opportunities. This in turn leads to an uplift to family income, which leads to countless further benefits for children and parents. On the individual level, access to quality childcare also benefits older siblings, who are often tasked with childcare responsibilities when there is a lack of formal care facilities. When this happens, we see higher school attendance of older siblings, which in turn precipitates improved school readiness, better nutrition outcomes – as children are able to eat at school – and improved educational attainment, which opens the door to better future employment opportunities. All of this spirals out to benefit society as a whole, bringing increased economic growth and business productivity, higher tax revenues and a reduced burden on government systems. However, the full effect of these benefits largely depends on the quality of the childcare environment in which children spend their time.

One of the major conclusions from the APHRC study is that subsidised early childhood care can help overcome the challenge faced by women in balancing childcare and paid work, and mitigate the consequences of gender inequalities in caring responsibilities. However, other APHRC studies have found that childcare provision, particularly in informal

settlement settings is still a long way from the required standard.⁵

For instance, childcare options that are available, affordable and of adequate quality are difficult to find among low-income families. This leaves women with few options, including the use of substandard childcare facilities, particularly when they are forced to go back to work – in some cases as early as two weeks after delivery. Other childcare options which are not viable, attractive or safe may include leaving the child at home under the care of a member of the extended family or another child, leaving the child alone at home, or bringing the child to work.

To cater for the growing demand for childcare services, private home-based care facilities, which are often of poor quality, have sprung up. Most of these facilities are crowded, poorly lit and ventilated and characterised by low caregiver-to-child ratios, poorly educated and untrained providers, a lack of play materials and non-responsive interactions between the caregiver and children.

The APHRC has made a number of policy recommendations to address these urgent issues. These include implementing minimum standards for childcare services; increasing involvement of the formal private sector in providing childcare support for working women, particularly those in the informal sector; and provision of guaranteed financial and resource support to childcare centres, including enhanced regulatory oversight on compliance with regulations.

In conversations with various policy stakeholders, it is clear that the government recognises the need for their participation in this sector. However, there needs to be clearer accountability so it's obvious which government departments are responsible for action. Otherwise issues around regulation of the childcare sector, quality of service provision, and cultural and social norms with regards to childcare responsibilities will continue to slip between the gaps and mothers and children will continue to suffer.

Breadwinners vs caregivers: why outdated family roles are bad for everyone



Ruth Gaunt
Professor of Social
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In 2020s Britain, fathers and mothers both want to spend time with their children and be closely involved in their care. In our recent national survey of parents with young children, more than three-quarters agreed that men could look after children just as well as women – only 9 per cent thought they couldn't – and the overwhelming majority (92 per cent) believed that men and women should share housework and childcare when both are employed, while only a tiny minority (1 per cent) thought they shouldn't.¹

But despite this widespread public support for gender equality in work and care, family responsibilities in heterosexual couples are still divided predominantly along traditional gender norms, with mothers providing the majority of care and fathers acting as the primary breadwinners.² In the UK in particular, men's work hours are among the longest in Europe,³ mothers' rates of full-time employment are among the lowest,⁴ and fathers' hours of care for young children are less than half those of mothers.⁵

This gendered division of work and care disadvantages everybody. As women carry the main responsibility for childcare, they tend to compromise their work lives by prioritising their family: they often work part-time, seek flexibility rather than advancement, and take long periods of leave for childcare.⁶ This limits their opportunities for career achievement and recognition. Similarly, as men carry the main responsibility for breadwinning, they tend to compromise their family lives by prioritising their paid work: they work full-time, longer hours, and do not take long leave periods for childcare. This limits their opportunities for developing nurturance and building close bonds with their children.⁷

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"This gendered
division of work and
care disadvantages
everybody"
.....

So, what explains this gap between the public support for gender equality and the reality, whereby work and care are

care are still largely divided along stereotypically gendered lines? What prevents more parents from sharing work and childcare equally?

One key barrier is outdated state policies that are incompatible with contemporary parents' views and preferences. Gender norms and parents' priorities are gradually changing, whereas out-of-date policies continue to reinforce traditional arrangements and encourage mothers to stay at home or work part-time and fathers to work full-time.

And this starts at the very beginning. Mothers are paid to stay at home for the first 39 weeks of the child's life while fathers are entitled to just two weeks of statutory paternity leave. Shared parental leave is rarely utilised, either because couples are not entitled to it, cannot afford the father's capped income, or the mothers do not wish to lose their time with their child by reducing their maternity leave. These policies severely restrict couples' choices and steer them into a traditional division of childcare during the infant's first months. Our research shows that they are incompatible with fathers' desire to be closely involved with their children, as well as with mothers' strong work identities and desire to share family work with their partners.⁸



Another key barrier is the lack of childcare alternatives. The absence of subsidised early childcare provision often means that one parent has to stay at home until the child turns three years old and qualifies for some limited free formal childcare. Couples therefore feel forced to identify a main carer with reduced involvement in paid work, and a main breadwinner with reduced involvement in childcare.

These barriers are complemented by unsupportive workplace cultures that encourage long work hours and discourage flexible and part-time work. To achieve flexible working arrangements, parents often have to sacrifice other important elements of job quality, such as pay, security, and progression opportunities.⁹

.....
“To achieve flexible working arrangements, parents often have to sacrifice other important elements of job quality, such as pay, security, and progression opportunities”
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Each of these barriers – gendered parental leave policies, lack of affordable formal childcare, and unsupportive workplace cultures – may not be insurmountable in and of themselves, however the combination of all three means that families face very limited options for organising childcare. Equal sharing is very hard to achieve when leave policies strongly penalise fathers’ longer absence from paid work, workplace cultures are inhospitable to part-time and flexible working, and the lack of affordable formal childcare necessitates reduced involvement in paid work.

Despite these barriers, 5 per cent of the heterosexual couples in our recent national sample still managed to maintain a strictly equal distribution of time and tasks, with each being equally involved in work and care.¹⁰ These couples were committed to a 50/50 split of family responsibilities, had a strong desire for the father to spend more time with their children and placed high value on the mothers’ paid work.¹¹ To achieve equal sharing, they used more hours of non-parental care, and each parent worked slightly shorter hours compared to main breadwinners and spent more time with their children as sole caregivers.

Equal sharers in our study described their sustained efforts to achieve equality, having to “fight for” their chosen arrangement by overcoming barriers that uphold and perpetuate the traditional female carer/male breadwinner division. Our data suggest that their efforts paid off. Compared to both semi-traditional couples and couples who reversed roles, equal sharers were more satisfied with their division of responsibilities, more likely to view it as resulting from their conscious choices, and less likely to want their division to change. In contrast, mothers who were the primary caregivers had lower wellbeing, relationship quality and self-esteem, while both men and women who were the main breadwinners tended to feel they had been forced into their role.

So, what needs to be done to remove the barriers and empower parents to organise family life in the way they want to, a way that enables equal participation in work and care? There needs to be a shift in state policies away from the outdated male breadwinner/female carer model and towards full gender equality. We need equal parenting leave entitlement, including non-transferable “use-it-or-lose-it” parental leave for fathers.

Once parental leave ends, parents should have access to significantly subsidised, high-quality early childcare, to allow both mothers and fathers to maintain their involvement in paid work. Finally, we need state and workplace policies supporting shorter and more flexible work hours for both fathers and mothers. Such changes would normalise equal involvement of mothers and fathers in paid work and childcare, and so enable parents to choose a balance that is best for them regardless of their gender.

Given the overwhelming public support for gender equality in work and care and the considerable potential benefits for parents, a shift in policy is imperative. Current policies do not align with couples’ commitment to equality, fathers’ desire to be closely involved in their children’s lives, and mothers’ strong attachment to work. Policy changes aimed at removing the barriers to equal sharing will enable parents to make more meaningful choices in line with their values and preferences.

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Parliament only changed its rules after I delayed giving birth to vote – and it still has a long way to go

Tulip Siddiq MP, Shadow Economic Secretary to the Treasury

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Editing and design by Becca Shepard

Additional editing by George May

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