

Childcare workers are underpaid because we're women. We are the working poor ^[1]

Author: Carey, Margaret

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EXCERPTS

I first began working in the childcare sector in 1990. As a recent graduate with a degree in visual arts, it was the obvious career path to become a cook in a long day care centre for toddlers! It was a non-profit community-based service and resonated with my values and beliefs.

I felt right at home but the pay was appalling. Financially I could not have survived without my partner, who had a "real" job with "real" pay. I continued though. It was a job I enjoyed and one I knew had value.

When I began to have children of my own, the position became untenable. Around the birth of my first child I discovered a couple of things that really unsettled me.

First, as a spouse, I was not considered by society as an individual at all. I was without independence and completely financially reliant on my partner. I had never been without the ability to earn some money, and the feeling that I was now individually penniless was a humiliating discovery. To be clear, it was a feeling of my own doing as my partner had no qualms about being the breadwinner and did not in any way play a guilt trip on me but I profoundly felt as if I had been robbed of something.

The second revelation was that my primary role and only apparent identity was as the child's mother; always the baby came first so it felt like another part of my being as an individual dissolved. But we carry on and we bear it and try to bear it well.

This capacity of women to put others' needs ahead of our own is the very capacity that we are exploited for. Think of it as being a milking cow. They are kept in constant production. They are milked and milked. Have another calf, get milked. Have another calf, get milked a bit more.

In my dark moments, I feel like an old milker. I have given and given in caring roles as a daughter, partner, mother, educator and director, thinking that one day the bleeding obvious value of those roles will be appreciated financially and fundamentally. I believe that caring, that actually giving a shit, is a feminist issue and one that must be valued as the armature of society, which it surely is.

My return to the workforce occurred when my baby was about four months old. I paid childcare fees and still had some take home money, but once my second child came along it took virtually all my wages. The centre management committee agreed to provide childcare free of charge for my second child to encourage and support me to continue to be able to work. I greatly appreciated this gesture but, really, I should not have had to rely on charity to allow me to work. Once I had my third child, I could not afford to continue to work at all.

This position of being unable to afford the very thing you work to provide for others is the ironic situation of early childhood educators to this day – hardly surprising when the average wage of qualified educators is just \$614 per week. We can't afford childcare, we can't afford to buy a house, let alone negatively bloody gear our second one and we will never have enough superannuation to be able to retire. We are the working poor, but meanwhile up at the other end ...

A recent cause for great glee in the stock market is that profits for early childhood corporates profits have hit the billion dollar mark. I for one am not celebrating.

This profit, and the early childhood sector as a whole, are built on my back and on the backs of tens of thousands of other women who work in the early childhood sector. Why would I celebrate when I know this sector is based on exploitation of educators and, in too many cases, on profiteering from children and families?

Kate Ellis hit the nail on the head when she said the system is broken. It has been for the last 20 years. It got broke when it began to be regarded as a profit machine instead of an educational landscape.

From the perspective of this early childhood educator it will remain broken until the incomes of the women who educate our youngest

children reflect our professional work.

That's why the women who educate and care for your children are angry (97% of long day care educators are women). We're angry that as 2016 comes to an end we are still underpaid because we are women who care, and because our professional skills are not respected. Who wouldn't be angry?

-reprinted from The Guardian

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