

A Day Without Child Care Workers ^[1]

Author: Ullrich, Rebecca

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EXCERPTS

Occupations traditionally deemed “women’s work” have been perpetually undervalued over the course of history. Child care is no exception.

March 8 is International Women’s Day, an opportunity to reflect on women’s achievements around the world and call for continued progress toward gender equity. To mark the day, some activists are calling on women to participate in a general strike – dubbed “A Day Without a Woman” by the organizers of the Women’s March on Washington.

Many have rightfully pointed out that, for some women, participating in a strike is out of reach—particularly among the most marginalized women, including those who work for hourly wages, don’t have paid time off, are living paycheck-to-paycheck, or aren’t protected by union representation. Organizers have recognized this, and are offering different ways for women to get involved in the day.

But as a researcher in early childhood policy, “A Day Without a Woman” got me thinking about the unique position of child care as an industry, and how it affects gender equity. On the one hand, working parents – especially mothers – depend heavily on child care providers to care for their children while parents work to support their families. But despite the significant role child care providers play in supporting our overall economy, many of the women who make up this workforce are barely getting by.

Access to high-quality, affordable child care is unarguably one of the most critical policy needs to support gender equity in the workplace. While gender roles are shifting, routine child care duties still fall heavily on mothers, meaning that access to child care can greatly benefit working mothers. Currently, over 8 million mothers rely on their child care providers in order to go to work and provide for their families. Some researchers estimate this number would be even higher if child care was more accessible and affordable for families. And for the 40 percent of U.S. mothers who are the sole or primary breadwinners in their households, access to reliable child care may be the difference between paying the bills one month or having the lights shut off.

In other words, our nation’s child care workers help empower women who work. But some of this empowerment comes at the expense of the 2 million women who care for and educate young children each day, the majority of whom are woefully underpaid.

Today, the median annual salary for a child care worker in a center is just \$22,000 per year — \$2,000 below the poverty line for a family of four. Many centers cannot afford to provide their workers paid vacation or sick days, employer-sponsored health insurance, or retirement plans. Regulated family child care providers generally fare no better, bringing in less than \$30,000 per year. Once one factors in overhead costs for family child care providers – such as food, supplies, and insurance – their take-home pay may be next to nothing.

This pattern is not new: occupations traditionally deemed “women’s work” have been perpetually undervalued over the course of history. Public policy has only reinforced the devaluation of care work and the women who provide it. Until 1974, domestic workers were not guaranteed the right to a minimum wage or overtime pay. This had a disproportionate impact on women of color and immigrant women, who are more likely to work as in-home care providers. The problem of low wages for child care workers – both in family child care homes and centers – was first identified in the 1970s, yet little to no progress was made over the last 40 years.

The consequences of having a child care system that is effectively subsidized by near poverty-level wages for providers can’t be understated. Almost half of all child care workers rely on public assistance, and many struggle to afford basic household necessities. Most any parent or caregiver knows how challenging it is to be responsive to your children when you’re stressed, overworked, or financially strapped. Now imagine being responsible for five toddlers when you aren’t sure if you can afford medication, groceries, or rent – let alone afford child care for your own children.

In many cases, parents’ well-being and the well-being of their children is ultimately intertwined with the well-being of the child care workforce. Parents can catalyze change by asking their child care providers about staff wages and benefits. They can also join their local Fight for \$15 campaigns and support ballot initiatives that lead to better wages for child care workers. Some states have implemented tax credits and wage supplement programs to help improve child care workers’ economic stability. Ultimately, increased federal funding for

early childhood programs will be critical to provide the workforce with a living wage, benefits, and support for professional development without increasing costs for parents.

On International Women's Day and beyond, it is all of our responsibility to advocate for the women that care for our nation's children every day.

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