

How affordable child care could reduce the gender inequities at work ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In the last year, every fellow parent I've met has lamented the high cost of child care to me. Even dual-income families reported spending at least 15 percent of monthly earnings on child care, a number supported by this report.

I also frequently heard from multiple women who were considering leaving their full-time jobs, a move they said was unthinkable in the past. But between the actual price tag and the emotional cost of leaving children for long hours in the care of strangers, it was often seeming like the only viable option.

New research finds that the high cost of child care in America widens the gender gap in the workplace. The study finds that government spending on early childhood education and care would have the most significant impact on creating gender equity at work — even more than offering paid parental leave, paid time off or flexible work schedules.

The study compared family-friendly government policies in a number of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. It found that the U.S. spends just 0.4 percent of its GDP on child care and early childhood education, far less than the majority of the countries studied. A country's low spending in these categories negatively impacted its women's earnings, employment opportunities and even fertility.

As a result, "making it easier to be a working mother may matter more than the length of leave or the payments that new parents receive while out of the labor force," concluded the authors, Claudia Olivetti and Barbara Petrongolo. The study also highlighted how the U.S. once led the other countries on female labor-force participation, but has experienced continuing decline in the 1990s, and even further in the 2010s to 62 percent. All the other countries in the study have seen a larger share of working women enter the market.

The lack of family-friendly working conditions in the U.S. have long prevented women from realizing their economic potential. Along with providing paid family leave, locally, we must prioritize making low-cost, high-quality child care available. Full-time annual care for one infant in King County now costs more than annual in-state tuition at University of Washington. No matter how many times I cite this in my writing, it always surprises me.

The far more talked about statistic is the lack of government-mandated paid maternity leave for U.S. workers. In Washington, we are seeing more policymakers prioritizing making paid leave a reality. No doubt, it's shameful to expect working families to absorb the economic impact of a woman taking time off to care for a newborn. But even for women working for the growing legion of corporations that now offer paid maternity leave as a benefit, the excessive cost of care for children ends up thwarting far too many working women's ambitions.

I'm still recovering from sticker shock as I ready to pay for my son's Seattle day care this year.

-reprinted from Seattle Times

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