

Sheryl Sandberg is right: the way America treats mothers has to change ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

It's supposed to take a village to raise a child. In America, however, it takes a really big bank account. Indeed, childcare costs in America are so astronomical that they've even become an issue for the wealthiest 0.001%. Ivanka Trump, for example, has made tax deductions for childcare one of her signature issues. And on Mother's Day, Sheryl Sandberg, the Facebook executive, called for America to improve its childcare policies and better support working mothers in a post on her personal Facebook page.

Sandberg pointed out that "the United States is one of the only developed countries in the world that doesn't guarantee paid family leave ... and the only developed country in the world without paid maternity leave." Further, "child care for two children exceeds the median annual rent in all 50 states".

Not only is childcare more than rent, it costs more than college, in many cases. According to a recent report from the think tank New America, full-time care in child care centers for children under the age of four is \$9,589 a year, while the average cost of in-state college tuition is \$9,410. This means a family earning the median household income would spend one-fifth of its income on childcare.

If you're an individual earning minimum wage, then childcare costs two-thirds of your income. Parenting isn't just expensive – it can be financially devastating. And yet, pro-life zealots never seem to argue for more affordable childcare as a means to reduce abortion. It's ironic that many factions of America are passionate about protecting the rights of fetuses but are quite happy to leave them to fend for themselves as soon as they're born.

America's lack of support for parents isn't just financially costly, it takes a big emotional toll. Research shows that American parents are less happy than their childless peers. This "happiness gap" exists in other developed countries, such Great Britain and Australia, but is significantly larger in America.

Researchers found that the negative impact of becoming a parent disappeared in countries which gave parents "the tools to combine work and family". Indeed parents in Norway, Sweden and Finland, places where the government provides greater support for working families, reported greater levels of happiness than non-parents.

Sandberg lost her husband, former SurveyMonkey chief executive Dave Goldberg, in 2015. Her post emphasizes the particular difficulties that working single parents face – an issue which she was criticized for not addressing in her 2013 book on women in the workplace, *Lean In*.

"Before, I did not quite get it. I did not really get how hard it is to succeed at work when you are overwhelmed at home," Sandberg admitted. And Sandberg points out that that while she is financially privileged, "for many single parents, there is no safety net. 35% of single mothers experience food insecurity". Yet America is the richest country in the world.

Sandberg doesn't just call for policy changes, importantly, she also calls for an attitudinal shift. America's childcare policies are stuck in the 1950s. They're designed around heterosexual family units where the men work and the women stay at home. But as Sandberg points out, "Since the early 1970s, the number of single mothers in the United States has nearly doubled. Today, almost 30% of families with children are headed by a single parent, and 84% of those are led by a single mother ... our attitudes and our policies do not reflect this shift."

Sadly, it seems unlikely that attitudes and policies in America will reflect this shift anytime soon. The lack of childcare support in the US is emblematic of just how much the country is geared around the individual and profit and how resistant it seems to be to supporting the greater good.

Indeed, in a recent town hall Congressman Rod Blum asked “why should a 62-year-old man have to pay for maternity care?” Blum is hardly the only person asking this question. The “why should I have to pay?” attitude is deeply entrenched in American society.

It doesn’t matter whether you have children or not, childcare is an issue that affects all of us. A lack of a safety net for working parents helps increase income inequality and drives women out of the workforce. It’s time that America stopped talking about “family values” and started to put them into practice.

-reprinted from The Guardian

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