

Universal childcare can break circle of poverty ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Both mainstream parties are proposing an extension of childcare services but with one major difference, the PN wants this to be universal.

Labour, which introduced free childcare in 2014, says this should be conditional on parents having gainful employment. Education minister Evarist Bartolo has said it would be unjust to extend childcare when working parents contribute to the economy through their taxes, and said this risked re-introducing a mentality of reliance on social benefits.

But anti-poverty campaigners insist free childcare should also be available to the poor and the unemployed.

When the free childcare services were introduced in 2014 they were intended to bridge the gender employment gap by enabling more women to enter gainful employment.

But Anna Borg, director of the University of Malta's Centre for Labour Studies, said universal childcare can mitigate social inequalities and break the circle of poverty.

Malta has the biggest gender employment gaps in the EU, with 81.4% of men in employment against 53.6% of women (aged 20-64), leading to a gap of 27.8%. This contrasts sharply with the gap in female and male employment rates in Finland, which gap amounts to just 2.1%.

While acknowledging that the gender employment gap is a complex one and does not depend solely on whether free childcare is available, Borg noted that between 2008 and 2016 there has been a positive increase in female participation in all years.

However, Borg said that the change since childcare was introduced for working families was below the average registered over the past 10 years.

"Whilst there was a positive increase in all years, the average annual increase during this period (2008-2016) amounted to 1.98%. Free childcare was introduced in Malta in April 2014, and when looking at the yearly increase after that, in 2015 and 2016, the change was actually below the average increase registered over the whole period," she said.

When looking specifically at the three years before the introduction of free childcare, the increase in those years was higher than the average. On the other hand, the change in 2015 was 1.6 and 1.9 in 2016 over 2015.

Asked what effect would an extension of a free childcare scheme to poor, unemployed parents have on the labour market, Borg said childcare, "should be first and foremost about children and not their parents, like school and a good education is totally geared for children and we never ask for the employment status of parents before allowing three-years olds to get into free kindergartens."

"So why should we discriminate against babies and children under three when we offer free education up to university level? This is insane because the free childcare scheme is about breaking the circle of poverty and ensuring that those children who need it most can access it, regardless of the employment status of their parents."

Studies have shown that quality childcare minimises the number of early school leavers and facilitates social mobility later on in life and Borg said that since the introduction of the new scheme in 2014, the issue of cost and affordability has been resolved since the service is being provided mainly free of charge to working parents.

"This allows them a better choice of childcare, independent of their income, and in ways has created more social cohesion among eligible parents. However, there is a negative flipside in that children coming from the most deprived or disadvantaged households, such as families afflicted with mental health, drug abuse or other social problems, risk being left out of the system."

Borg said that in such households, it is more difficult to have both parents (or the single parent) in the formal labour market or following educational courses at diploma or degree level.

"Hence, there is a high risk that they would not be able to meet the eligible criteria if they are afflicted with such problems. This raises immediate concerns of social cohesion, for it is a known fact that apart from increasing maternal employment rates, quality childcare can mitigate social inequalities in early life."

Moreover, Borg said, the children most likely to benefit from quality childcare are those from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

She added that childcare can provide a protective role for children and helps to address in part the children's living conditions in at-risk households with outcomes felt at later stages by minimising the number of early school leavers and facilitating social mobility.

"Childcare centres can also play a role in flagging up neglect and abuse of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Hence as it stands, the eligibility criteria of the free childcare scheme in Malta may be excluding the most vulnerable children," Borg said.

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