

The fight for childcare work to be valued, and paid, properly ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The Fair Work Commission recently put an end to a five year battle by unions for a 35% pay increase for childcare educators.

The unions had been arguing that gender inequality is seeing such work undervalued.

But according to the Commission, gender inequality is not an issue. In dismissing the unions' application, the Commission claimed they had failed to provide "any evidence whatsoever" that gender inequality was behind childcare work being undervalued.

That's despite the fact 97% of childcare educators are female, and earning significantly less than the rest of the population. These workers take home an average \$21 an hour, about half the average hourly wage in Australia. "You can earn more money working in a supermarket," educator Kylie Grey told the ABC.

As childcare consultant Lisa Bryant writes for Fairfax, the educators' argument had been fairly simple. They pointed to the fact society is undervaluing what it perceives as the 'soft skills' of such educators because they are often seen as an extension of the unpaid work mothers are already performing at home.

Seeing these skills in such a way implies that they are not really skills at all — or all that difficult to perform, or all that worthy of being paid for. It also fails to account for the value of early childhood education in improving a child's chances in schooling (and everything that follows) later on.

It may also suggest that women will carry out this work regardless. And wouldn't it be immediately convenient if mothers could just do this unpaid work, while also contributing to the paid economy? And if a mother can feed, clean, love care and manage a baby and toddler, surely she can also manage the pre-school component of a child's development?

The Lifting Our Game report released last week found that Australia is investing much less in early education than our OECD counterparts. That's despite study after study highlighting the value of early childhood education, particularly for those aged three to five.

On the one hand we're seeing early childhood education as vital, but then on the other we're refusing to pay for it accordingly.

Meanwhile, early educators are already leaving the sector to pursue other (and presumably better paid) careers. Bryant says that around one in five early childhood educators are considering leaving the profession due to the low wages and social status of the work. And we can't really blame them for wanting to look elsewhere.

As Bryant notes, it may not be up to parents to demand more: to speak out about the need for educators to be valued and paid accordingly,

to put more pressure on the government to do more a sector that is setting their children up for life.

The ruling now looks set to see childhood educators going on strike on March 27 in order to demand the government help fund equal pay.

Already education minister Simon Birmingham has dismissed the strike as a “political stunt”.

The below quote from Bryant is telling:

“If educators all leave, what will we do as a country when there is no one left to care for the children? It may just be women’s work, but like all women’s work you sure as hell will notice when it is no longer done.”

-reprinted from Women's Agenda, via Smart Company

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