

A silver bullet for women? The case for universal child care explored ^[1]

Could universal access to high quality childcare be considered a silver bullet for women?

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EXCERPTS

This was the question posed by The Parenthood and Thrive by Five in collaboration with Women's Agenda yesterday, explored through an online panel which included leading non-executive director Sam Mostyn, Chief Executive Officer of Diversity Council of Australia, Lisa Annese and Women's Agenda's Editor, Tarla Lambert.

Executive Director of The Parenthood Georgie Dent moderated the event where the panelists discussed the urgent need for universal, high quality early learning and care while examining how child care policy had, last week, propelled itself to the top of the political agenda.

First Reflections

Making early education and care affordable opens up many doors, suggested Lisa Annese.

"Universal child care is good for women's participation in the workplace," she said. "It's an enabler for women. They are given genuine choices, and available, affordable child care is a real choice."

Annese remembers the days when people labeled Paid Parental Leave a socialist idea.

"We are hearing the same defences around universal child care," she said. "I just think we should push through it because if you take it away, workers see it as an enabler to stay connected to their work place and spend time with their children at home, as is required."

"The case for universal child care is that it's good for families – heterosexuals, homosexuals, single parents. Anyone. It enables women to contribute to the workplace more fully and have less barriers to participation."

Annese wants us to consider child care as a social benefit. "Men become more engaged with their families," she said. "The outcomes are very positive. We may not live in the large communities we used to when we were hunter gatherers, but having communities where there are care for children is good and we need to broaden the benefits."

Sam Mostyn shares this perspective, adding that universal affordable child care is an economic and social win.

"The question of who is responsible for child-care and who has to give up their dreams to raise a family is a matter which the government should assess frankly," she said. "It's not a political or social problem. It's economic."

"Sensible and affordable child care is the biggest pay back for our country. It's one of the clearest ways to support women's participation in the workforce. We now expect our government to invest in things that boost our economy. Universal child care will boost the labour force participation. It will lead to additional jobs in the child care sector that leads to more employment in that market. We're building new jobs for women who hold most of the jobs in that sector."

"Universal access to child care provides education, wellbeing and life chances for young people. That investment has the most significant longterm impact. One in 5 children are considered developmentally vulnerable when they start school. We currently waste \$15.2 billions annually on things we can avoid if we invest in those kids. The thing that emerges most clearly from research is that people who want to do work and have families desperately need a model where they can do both," she said.

In the last few years, Mostyn has seen men wanting a system they can access, "so they can be better parents and encourage their female partners to return to paid work."

"People can uplift their productivity, sense of engagement and contribution whilst being clear about family obligations and duties," she said.

For Women's Agenda's Editor Tarla Lambert, the case for universal childcare is particularly pertinent to her own circumstances now, as a working mother. Her first son, Teddy was born eight months ago and started in child care at six months. She admits that while she was aware of the issues and shortfalls of Australia's childcare system, the expense still came as a shock. "It's a considerable expense, even for

families with moderate incomes,” she said.

“For many families the cost of child care is too much,” she continued. “It is prohibitive to women going back to the workforce. Women are shouldering the burden of care needs right now and they’re less likely to be back in the workforce quickly.”

Lambert said that reliving the Budget speech by Josh Frydenberg still makes her eye twitch.

“Coming out with a two-hundred and forty million dollar proposal for women who have been hardest hit by this crisis was just so inadequate it’s unspeakable. It incensed so many people around the country and fairly so. It was a huge missed opportunity on child care and reforming paid parental leave and on additional funding for domestic and family violence, for Aboriginal and girls education. There were so many glaring omissions there.”

“It pissed people off and we should be propelled into this movement.”

Not a “women’s issue”

Evidently, the cost of child care cuts deeply into many families’ household income. And yet, child care continues to be framed as a “women’s issue”.

“We know when a couple have a child, the couple’s working pattern changes,” Dent remarked. She then asked the panelists “What’s the impact on men when it comes to the high cost of child care?”

Lambert said there are a number of structural issues at play. “We need to look at paid paternal leave schemes which are grossly inadequate,” she said. “Two weeks is still ridiculous.”

Lambert believes flexibility is one key aspect employers need to normalise. She quoted statistics from a Melbourne University finding which revealed that men’s participation in the domestic workload has improved slightly since the start of the pandemic. “Child care would be a silver bullet for me,” Lambert said. “I think it would change how women are able to make that transition back into the workforce when they want to.”

Lambert also stressed the importance of changing the language and attitudes we have around early childhood education and care. “My decision to put Teddy into care when he was 6 months old,” she said, was based on the knowledge that “he was going to be stimulated with quality educators. We need to talk about that more.”

“The rhetoric is often that women feel guilty. As Anthony Albanese said, it’s not care we’re talking about. It’s about education. We need to re-wire this conversation. It’s part of the conversation we need as a society that can then grow our future leaders.”

Mostyn agreed, saying “We have to flip this away from it being a women’s issue. I thought this was the moment the government would do something about this. I have to say, I listened to the Treasurer read the budget, I was sad. It was clearly a missed opportunity.”

Hybrid Models of Child Care

Lisa Annese believes we need to move towards hybrid models of child care.

“We need to mainstream flexibility,” she said. “It’s not just about being given a laptop and zoom account. We need to ask ourselves; How do we design a career path? How do we manage productivity, engagement, creativity, improve mental health wellbeing, reduce risk? For employers it’s a massive mind shift.”

Annese believes running a team and creating meaningful work in a flexible way is a skill everyone needs to think about seriously. “It’s important for businesses to get across this,” she said. “It’s also important to recognise there’s been higher visibility of caring because we’ve all been at home this year.”

“Pre-COVID, we put out a study last year that showed the economics of the gender pay gap, revealing that 39 percent of the gender pay gap is due to care family and workplace participation issues. We measured the impact of unpaid care and housework and found that 7 percent of the gender pay gap can be explained by unpaid care and housework, where men and women had similar hours.”

Annese believes that COVID has created more visibility around that.

Visible and invisible

Annese also thinks that changes to child care begins much earlier than the moment we are employed in paid jobs. She urged audiences to consider the types of tasks that are visible and the types that are invisible.

“Men tend to do things like taking the kids to sport, or other highly visible things,” she said. “Whereas women tend to be doing the emotional labour of executing a list of things for the men to do. She’s also probably the one in the laundry, cleaning off the dirt on socks. That is invisible work.”

“Sharing boring work is important,” she said. “This is about how we raise our boys and our girls and reconsidering what are the rules of a partnership in straight relationships are. We can’t wait for the workplace to change things. Things have to change much earlier.”

Georgie Dent agreed, remarking on the importance of employers to develop policies so that men and women embrace their caring responsibilities. “We can’t overhaul our early education system,” she said. “But the government needs to set up a better framework.”

Sam Mostyn added that “Business can’t do everything.”

“I’m optimistic we will build a prosperous economy. When the community speaks, the government will listen. Structural and systemic barriers are holding back our economy.”

Mostyn quoted Ruth Bader Ginsburg who famously said that women belong in any space where decisions are made.

Unexpected positive to COVID crisis

Georgie Dent remarked that there have been a number of significant and compelling social and economic arguments for universal child care this year alone.

“They co-exist and they stand on their own. We know that the benefits to children of giving them access to high quality care and education is in and of itself enough. We should be doing it just for that. But we also know that the economic benefits are there. We know that to genuinely reduce gender inequality this is a fundamental investment we need to make.”

“The fact that there are multiple valid and legitimate cases for investing in this policy is a strength, but sometimes, it has served to fracture the different arguments. My point is that we need to prosecute all of the valid arguments for universal early education and care as enthusiastically as we can.”

“We know that between 0 – 5 are the most richly formative years in a child’s life. So, prioritising those years in our educational policies matters. If you get those years right, you increase a child’s ability to start school in a position where they can learn and they are less developmentally vulnerable.”

“The case for supporting more women in the workplace in a way that affordable childcare would do is compelling investment policy proposition on its own. The fact that Australia is having a conversation about access to universal high quality education is one of the most welcome, unexpected developments this year.”

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