

Policymakers used to ignore child care. Then came the pandemic. ^[1]

Experts who sounded the alarm about the care economy were often shunted to the side of policy discussions. Not anymore.

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EXCERPTS

When the economist Nancy Folbre got a call from the MacArthur Foundation in 1998, she was expecting rejection: a courtesy call to deny the funding application she'd submitted.

She had reason to think an institution might overlook her work. It explained how the care sector — defined as economic activity in the home and the market — was a crucial part of the economy but operated differently than other types of businesses.

You can't measure the productivity of a child-care center the way you would, say, a car factory, she explained. The incentives are nothing alike. The profits don't go only to the center's owner. Instead, benefits are shared by children and their parents, and society as a whole. The country benefits from a more educated and productive work force.

For years mainstream economists, mostly men, had argued that child care or other care work was something women did purely out of love, impossible to think about as an economic issue, she said. "It's women's natural inclination or moral duty to do it," Dr. Folbre said, describing this school of thought.

So that 1998 call was a surprise: She had won a "genius" grant for her research. It was the beginning of a very long journey from fringe idea to more mainstream policy.

"I had people tell me, you're throwing your career away," she said, describing sentiments she heard from fellow economists. "You're focusing on issues that are just girly issues."

The "girly issues" are now the country's issues.

School and child-care closures in the pandemic pushed parents, mostly women, to a breaking point, either out of work or completely overloaded. Ten million mothers of school-age children were out of the work force at the start of the year, an increase of 1.4 million from 2020, according to a report from the Census Bureau.

For so long, Dr. Folbre and others sounding the alarm about child care in the United States were shunted to the side of policy conversations. It was left to parents (typically mothers) to figure out who would look after their children so they could get to work. If the United States treated other elements of infrastructure that are critical to the economy the way it does child care, you could imagine the chaos: Car owners would be left building bridges out of duct tape and scrap iron to get to the office, begging close relatives to come by each morning to hold a traffic light up at the corner.

That's changing. The Biden administration and its allies are pushing the notion that caring for children — and the sick and the elderly — is just as crucial to a functioning economy as any road, electric grid or building. It's human infrastructure, they argue, echoing a line of thought long articulated by feminist economists (and often ignored).

President Biden included money for home-based care for the elderly and the disabled under the umbrella of infrastructure, as part of a \$2 trillion package he proposed in March. The next month, he proposed more funding for paid family leave, universal pre-K and \$225 billion for child care.

The ambitious legislation is going to face huge hurdles in Congress, but Dr. Folbre, now 68, is both cautiously optimistic and heartened by the culture shift: "I often say to myself I'm glad I lived this long so I can say maybe I had a point."

Every snag in the system

Marisel Mendez and her husband, David, each the first in their immigrant families to earn college degrees and find rewarding careers, assumed they'd rely on high-quality child care to make everything work. She holds a master's in public health from Columbia University and works at a nonprofit near Kent, Wash., where they live; he has a master's in education policy and works as a coach for elementary

school teachers.

Yet, now they're debating if one of them should stop working altogether.

Over the past year, the Mendezes have cycled through four different child-care arrangements for Milea, their 2-and-a-half-year-old daughter, starting with an overcrowded center they felt was unsafe, then a back-and-forth with an in-home day care struggling to survive through the pandemic, and a stressful marathon at home managing remote work and never-ending toddler duty.

"We're starting to think for our mental health and for our relationship as a family, does it make more sense for one of us to step down, shift to part time?" said Ms. Mendez, 28, who is expecting another baby in June. The prospect of an infant, a full-time job and a still uncertain child-care arrangement is overwhelming. "I never thought I'd be here. That we would all be here," she said.

But in a sense it was inevitable that they would be, since they were headed toward a cliff — with no bridge spanning it.

Instead of a public federal early child-care system, akin to those of other developed nations, the United States wound up with a patchwork: a mix of for-profit and nonprofit providers, in centers and private homes. In some areas of the country, child-care deserts, there are shortages of providers and parents contend with long waiting lists and high prices.

Yet, the providers themselves operate on a shoestring. The median hourly wage for a child-care worker: \$11.65 an hour, according to a report earlier this year from the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California, Berkeley. Kindergarten teachers make nearly three times as much, \$32.80 an hour.

The Mendezes hit all the snags in the system. They were faced with wait-lists at all their top choice centers when they first moved with their daughter from Boston to the Pacific Northwest in August 2019, before ultimately settling on a place with some reservations. It cost about \$1,100 a month.

They said the place was too crowded and children didn't seem to get enough attention. "We felt every time we picked her up she was just very anxious," David Mendez, 29, said. Ms. Mendez said they noticed workers were quitting, too. (Child care, with its low pay, sees high turnover rates.)

The Mendezes believed they were lucky when they found another spot in February 2020 at a day care near their home, based out of the owner's house. She spoke Spanish. A plus. The couple, both Mexican-American, speak the language and wanted their daughter to grow up bilingual.

"We loved it. We felt so comfortable. Our daughter loved it, too," said Mr. Mendez. "We saw the change in her. When we dropped her off, she'd just wave and say 'bye'. Like, 'it's time for you guys to go.'"

Not even a month in, however, the day care's owner got Covid-19. There was no one else to replace her; so the center shuttered and the Mendezes did that very 2020 thing of trying to work from home, while tag teaming parenting duties.

Ms. Mendez talks about how she was "lucky" to have a flexible job, so she could log on at 5 a.m. She missed meetings and days at work. They kept Milea home with them for months, while their day care provider recovered and until they were comfortable with the idea of sending her back.

Mr. Mendez's mother came up from California to help, but she was working remotely, too. "Between the three of us we shuffled around," said Ms. Mendez. "It feels like a blur. It felt impossible."

By June, they took their daughter back to the family child care. That didn't last.

Child-care operators were hit hard by Covid. Operating costs rose to deal with new health requirements but revenues sank as many parents became unemployed — or decided to keep children home as the virus spread. By the end of 2020, 13 percent of centers and in-home day cares were closed, according to a survey released in February.

Children started dropping out of the Mendezes' family center, they said. By December, they learned it would close permanently; the owner was no longer making enough to get by. In January 2021, the Mendezes were once again looking for a child-care bridge so they could keep their jobs.

At least with public schools, parents know they're not going out of business. Early child care is a whole different thing.

Wonders, a center in Corvallis, Ore., that served 45 children, shut its doors in April 2020, sending parents scrambling.

"I completely panicked," said Kate Aronoff, a mental health counselor who lives in Corvallis and sent her two children to Wonders. "It felt like the rug was pulled out from under us. It just kind of baffled me that we were expected to continue working and just figure it out."

What could be more fundamental?

For years, parents and child-care advocates sounded the alarm about the inadequate child-care system in the United States.

"Basically if we can deliver water and electricity and internet to every home in this country we should be able to create good care options for everyone," Ai-jen Poo, director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance and Caring Across Generations, and a leader in the push to treat care as infrastructure, said in a recent interview.

On a call in April, she echoed this notion. "If the definition of infrastructure is that which enables commerce and economic activity, what could be more fundamental?" she asked.

Ms. Poo, another recipient of a MacArthur “genius” grant, was most likely the first to use the term “infrastructure” to refer to care-related work in her 2015 book “The Age of Dignity,” about caring for the elderly.

Recently, in thinking about how she came up with the framing, she recalled growing up and watching her mother and grandmother raise her while working nonstop.

“So much of what they did was invisible,” she said. Ms. Poo also recalled getting to college in New York City and watching women of color push white babies in strollers down Riverside Drive. “It’s just this part of the economy that’s been so devalued and to great detriment of everyone involved,” she said.

The same year Ms. Poo’s book was published, Anne-Marie Slaughter cited her work in calling for a care infrastructure in her book, “Unfinished Business,” a follow-up to a viral article she wrote for The Atlantic titled “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All.”

“It just seems so obvious. Child care is essential for women to be able to work. But in the society we still live in it is not essential for men,” Ms. Slaughter said recently in a phone interview, acknowledging Ms. Poo and Dr. Folbre as giants in this area. “Yet men are defining what infrastructure is.”

Men were also devising, and sidelining, child-care policies. The United States came close to public child care nearly 50 years ago, when bipartisan majorities in Congress passed a bill that would have funded a nationwide system. But facing pressure from conservatives, President Richard Nixon vetoed the bill. The legislation had “family-weakening implications,” he said.

As more women arrived in Congress in the intervening years, these issues gained traction, spearheaded by supporters like Senator Patty Murray, a Democrat from Washington who was a preschool teacher. Care economy issues were also a key part of the campaigns of the four female senators who ran for president in 2020, bringing heightened attention to these policies even before the pandemic increased urgency.

Some conservatives still argue today that women should be home with the children, but it’s an increasingly fringe view. Sixty-five percent of women with preschool and school-aged children work, according to March data calculated by Misty L. Heggeness, a principal economist at the Census Bureau.

The lack of consistent child care was one factor that helps explain the higher than expected unemployment numbers released by the Labor Department on Friday.

“I’ve taken my son to work and snuck him in closets because I didn’t have child care,” said Sarah Murphy, 47, who lives with her 8-year-old son, in North Braddock, Pa. Before the pandemic she was working as a cleaner in apartment buildings, and had a side gig as an extra on movie and TV sets.

She hasn’t been able to work since, as her son was in virtual school. Recently he started a hybrid program, but that’s unreliable, she said. “I have to be on call in case someone gets sick, they close the school and send them home.”

Ms. Murphy doesn’t have the money for child care, which would help her at least interview for work. She’s getting by with stimulus checks and help from her son’s father, who lives nearby. She can’t plan to work in the summer, either, since it’s unclear what her son will be able to do.

“What job wants to hire a person who doesn’t know how her summers are going to be?” she said.

Kate Davenport, co-president of Eureka Recycling, a nonprofit in Minneapolis, said she’s had staff members quit their jobs since the pandemic because they had children at home and couldn’t come to work. Although she tried to be flexible about hours and offered some the option to work remotely, some employees simply couldn’t do that.

“You can’t drive a truck from home,” she said.

There were issues with child care even before the pandemic for her staff, Ms. Davenport said. The most frustrating involved something she called the benefit cliff: Some of the very lowest-income parents get subsidies from the federal government to help pay for care; if they earn too much money, however, they lose that benefit.

Ms. Davenport said she’s had many workers turn down promotions because they couldn’t afford to lose child care.

The tension here is what Nancy Folbre and other feminist economists first started working on decades ago, and what policymakers have just caught up with, barely: that a system where working parents do not have reliable, affordable child care is one where they cannot reliably build a career.

Dr. Folbre is optimistic that the country is at a turning point — though she describes herself as “hopeful and worried.”

“It’s just not clear which way things are going to keep turning,” she said, crediting the Biden administration with recognizing the time had come to recognize care as part of the economy. “We have to keep our shoulder to the wheel.”

The Mendezes, wary of putting their daughter through another change, aren’t looking for another child-care center. “We’re not going to disrupt her again,” Ms. Mendez said.

They’ve hired a helper from their beloved, now closed, family day care to come to their house. She looks after their daughter and a 4-year-old child who also needed care when the center shut down.

The caregiver doesn't do the kinds of learning activities that they found at a child-care center, the Mendezes said. So, Ms. Mendez is carving out time to build a curriculum for the children. She also acts as translator between the other child's family — they speak only English — and their caregiver, who speaks only Spanish.

"It's been really overwhelming," she said. "I feel like now we're back doing our full-time jobs and running a little day care."

With their baby expected in June, all options are on the table, she said, even downsizing to an apartment to make ends meet on a single income. Mr. Mendez said he might pick up a second job if his wife takes time out of her career. "We worked so hard to be here. We love our jobs and our families," Ms. Mendez said. "It's an extra painful conversation."

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