

Opinion: Without a public childcare model there can be no equality for women ^[1]

The National Women's Council says inadequate State investment in childcare has led to an unsustainable system in crisis.

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AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

The pandemic has clearly exposed how childcare is absolutely crucial for the functioning of our society and economy.

We saw during successive lockdowns how women were disproportionately affected by increased childcare responsibilities. Women were more likely to report on the struggle to provide full time care to children at home while working at the same time from home.

Childcare remains the single most significant barrier to women's equal participation in all aspects of society, and greatly impacts the decisions that women can take in their lives.

Recently the Citizens Assembly on Gender Equality voted almost unanimously to recommend State investment in a public model of childcare as a key way to remove barriers to women's equality.

Through this outcome, the Citizens signalled not just a strong public desire for quality services, but also a willingness to pay for them.

Public model more affordable

We know from other European countries that a public model of childcare is a crucial mechanism for the provision of services that are more affordable, accessible and of higher quality than countries with private service provision. Workers are provided with better pay and conditions through this public model.

For too long, inadequate State investment in childcare has led to an unsustainable system in crisis.

Women within families have been either pushed out of the workforce to provide care to their families or pay the highest fees in Europe for privatised childcare services.

While most parents are affected by the high cost of childcare, it acts as a significant barrier to employment for women who are not high earners. Lone parents are particularly affected by affordability, with 60% of lone parents unable to pay for childcare services.

At the same time, childcare workers are some of the worst paid in the country. Minimal investment is creating a poorly paid, un-pensionable workforce that is predominately made up of women.

Often reliant on precarious contracts, six out of ten childcare workers are earning below the Living Wage. Professional salary scales are necessary to retain a qualified workforces and to provide opportunities for career progression.

Shift to sharing of care

While investment in a public model of quality affordable accessible early years and out of school hours care is crucial, this must be combined with a number of measures to ensure a greater sharing of childcare in families.

We need to see a major shift in workplace culture towards flexible working arrangements, as well as an increase in payment and duration of parental leave, to ensure that taking leave is a realistic option for all families.

Finally, we need to enshrine the value of care to our society by replacing Article 41.2 of the Constitution also known as the 'women in the home' clause with an inclusive, gender neutral statement.

At a time in Ireland where we can clearly see that the provision of early years childcare is an essential public service, investment must be

high on the political agenda if the Government is serious about solving the childcare crisis once and for all.

It is crucial that Budget 2022 delivers a clear pathway to a truly affordable, high-quality childcare system. The National Women's Council is working with its members in a new drive for public quality early years and out of school hours childcare for all.

Region: Europe ^[3]

Tags: women's labour force participation ^[4]

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