

# Ending child poverty is a policy choice<sup>[1]</sup>

Netflix's hit show "Maid" is the reality for hundreds of millions of children and their families worldwide.

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online<sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

"My daughter learned to walk in a homeless shelter."

This is not just the powerful opening line of Stephanie Land's memoir *Maid: Hard Work, Low Pay, and a Mother's Will to Survive*, on which the Netflix show was based. It's the lived experience of many women and children across the world.

Land's story depicts a single mother struggling to survive on meager and unreliable wages, while jumping through hoops to receive government support like childcare.

The show captures the excruciating plight of families living in poverty, even in rich countries. It's a holding pattern that can look like: no decent pay to save money, no savings to fix the broken car, no car to get better work, no work to afford nutritious food, no food to focus on tomorrow, no focus to fight – as many in poverty are forced to – for affordable housing and a living wage. It displays, screen-sized, the unimaginable anxiety of deciding whether to spend that last \$10 bill on gas, or breakfast, or phone service. It presents the mental torture of counting every penny, buzzing with the dread of an unforeseen expense – a trip to the doctor for your daughter's unshakable illness, brought on, it turns out, by the mould festering in your decaying home.

In the world's wealthiest nations, like Land's home country, one in seven children experience poverty. In the European Union, one in four children live at risk of poverty and social exclusion. For many, that suffering is invisible to those around them. Yet, as the next generation grows up, the scars of affliction stretch, morphing into trauma and anxiety.

If we zoom out, some 1 billion children worldwide are deprived of their basic rights, including health care, housing and education. A staggering one in six live in extreme poverty – meaning they survive on less than \$1.90 per day.

Too often, this vicious cycle is escapable only for those whose governments prioritize it or have the financing and support to expand their efforts – by offering child benefits, school meals and education programmes for children. And cash assistance, childcare services and affordable housing for parents.

Child poverty is not inevitable, nor immune to efforts to address it.

Without social protection systems, poverty will pass from one generation to the next – a phenomenon that still plagues the richest countries, and seems to be worsening in developing ones.

Despite the profound impacts social protection programmes can have, three out of four children globally remain without access to them in any form. Single mothers (and their children) are more likely to live in poverty, and poverty is also higher among indigenous, Black and Hispanic households. More than half of all mothers with a newborn are deprived of maternity benefits, forcing them to spend their time earning wages instead of attending to the health needs – both physical and mental – of themselves and their children.

Is it possible to end this cycle? Absolutely. Child poverty is not inevitable, nor immune to efforts to address it. Ending child poverty is a policy choice, and countries that have made this choice have drastically reduced the number of children growing up impoverished.

One key policy decision is to establish and expand social protection systems and programmes, alongside the family-friendly policies critical for children, women and all parents, especially in the early years of childhood. These include child benefits, paid maternity and parental leave, childcare services, and policies that enable women to work in the formal and informal economy.

When the COVID-19 crisis hit, social protection programmes were a lifeline for families the world over: like Wasana's in Sri Lanka, who saw their savings dry up during lockdown, or Telma's in Guatemala, who lost their source of income. Cash assistance from a government programme can make the difference between living in dignity or living in hunger.

Other critical policy choices include improving universal access to quality social services, so that no one gets left behind because they don't know about (or have resources to navigate the complex bureaucratic processes for) public services, especially those related to early childhood development, basic and secondary schooling, health care and housing. Promoting a decent work agenda is also key, by taking

measures to deliver quality, inclusive jobs with decent wages and safe, flexible working environments.

Stephanie Land and her children no longer live in poverty, but they are an exception to the rule. For most families, the odds of escaping poverty remain slim without significant policy change.

So, what if you're not a policymaker? You can still advocate for change that improves the circumstances of others: You can take a stance and demand child- and family-friendly policies and programmes from your lawmakers. You can voice your support for programmes that reduce child poverty – such as the Child Tax Credit in the US, which, by some projections, will cut child poverty by half. Or, in the EU, the Child Guarantee – Europe's flagship programme to address child poverty by breaking the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage for millions of children. No matter where you live, you can call for governments and businesses to invest in policies we know make a difference. For example:

- The expansion of adequate and universal child benefits
- Investment in affordable, quality childcare services, critical for ensuring support to women, parents and children
- The introduction of at least 6 months of maternity and parental benefits
- A holistic package of family-friendly policies to support parents today and the next generation of children

Maid reflects the lived reality of millions of women and children today. Let's make the choice to change that and end child poverty for good.

**Region:** International [3]

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