

Childcare costs are forcing women in Britain out of work. It needn't be this way ^[1]

In increasing numbers, mothers are giving up their jobs and not going back – to the detriment of society as a whole

Author: Bates, Laura

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EXCERPTS

For the first time in decades, the number of women not returning to work after having a baby is on the rise.

To find the reason why, we don't have to look much further than the spiralling cost of a full-time nursery place for a child under two, which has risen from an average of £236 a week in 2018, to £274 in 2022. That means, for many women with two or more young children, the cost of childcare far outstrips their salary. The numbers simply don't add up.

We are also witnessing the gendered after-effects of the height of the pandemic, when mothers of small children lost work at three times the rate of fathers. As research from the London School of Economics found, the government “consistently failed” to consider gender in its response to Covid-19.

These women are described as “economically inactive”, a misnomer that lays bare the extent to which our economy fails to acknowledge the unpaid labour of women. Some commentators have suggested that the number of women leaving the workforce is the result of a “realignment of priorities”, which suggests that it is a pleasant choice women have happily made for themselves. But a survey of 27,000 parents revealed that childcare costs have forced 43% of mothers to consider leaving their jobs and 40% to work fewer hours.

As always, it is the most vulnerable mothers who are paying the highest price. The cost of living crisis means that one in four parents have had to cut down on necessary expenses such as food or heating to afford childcare, choices no family should have to make. The colossal cracks in our childcare system exacerbate child poverty as well as devastating women's economic participation.

And it isn't only the cost of childcare that is holding women back, but also the difficulty of accessing it in ways that fit around paid work. With the government sending a strong message that it expects employees to return to offices, many women have found that their employers aren't prepared to accept reasonable flexible working requests that would allow them to make childcare and working hours compatible. It seems to have escaped the government's notice that not all of us are incapable of working effectively from home without being distracted by chunks of cheese. For some women, the ability to work flexibly isn't a matter of snacks, it's the choice between holding down a job or being forced out of the workplace altogether.

The preschool years may be a relatively short period, but they have long-lasting effects. Women who return to work after a childcare break when their children start school will face the prejudice and disadvantages of a system that views their time off as a black mark on their CV, and does not recognise the injustice that caused it, nor appreciate the stunningly complex set of skills they will have acquired during that time. When the labour of childcare goes unpaid and underappreciated, so too do the considerable transferable skills that come with it.

Further down the road we are creating another timebomb: the eventual impact on the pensions of women who are already fighting the unjust impact the system has had on them. When a system is built by and for men, when women are simply not included in the equation, they will continue to be collateral damage.

Perhaps most outrageous of all is that the government's response to this has been to suggest trying to make childcare cheaper, by loosening the rules around the number of children that nursery staff can care for, a proposition described by experts as a “disaster for the sector”. Research has shown that less regulation leads to poor-quality provision, without fees going down. And experts have warned that ratio relaxations would only exacerbate the already existing crisis of recruitment and retention of early-years staff.

There is no loophole or easy way out here. The government will balk at the idea of investing millions in the childcare sector, but it is an investment, not a cost: it is estimated that if women's participation in work was as high in the UK as a whole as it already is in the south-west of England, it could add £48bn a year to the UK's economy.

And government investment is needed desperately. The average wage in the UK early-years sector is a measly £7.42 an hour (below minimum wage), yet 86% of childcare providers say that government funding for the three- and four-year-old early entitlement scheme

does not cover the cost of delivering places, causing many to operate at a loss and a significant number of settings to close their doors permanently, adding yet further pressure on working parents as places become increasingly scarce.

The UK could learn a few lessons from Luxembourg, where the government provides up to 60 hours free a week and subsidised childcare to all children aged between one and four. Or Iceland, which offers lengthy, largely non-transferable leave to both parents, paid at 80% of average income. Mandating the right to flexible working (rather than the toothless “right to request”) and normalising uptake among men as well as women, would also be steps in the right direction toward sharing the burden of childcare equally between men and women.

There are solutions that can support our children’s development and women’s careers. The real question is whether our cabinet – comprised of six women and 17 men – care to implement them

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