

We won't get real equality until we price breastmilk, and treat breastfeeding as work ^[1]

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Source: The Conversation

Format: Article

Publication Date: 15 Nov 2023

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

Excerpts

The Australian Women's Economic Equality Taskforce delivered a major report last month drawing attention to what it called the "motherhood penalty" – the 55% cut in earnings for Australian women in the first five years after having a child.

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Shying away from the reality that women breastfeed is in some ways unsurprising. Breastfeeding is divisive because it cuts across what some see as the most important goal for women's empowerment – gender equity in unpaid work and the care of children, including infants.

Most care work can be reallocated

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In Australia, women spend 3.4 hours per day on "domestic duties", whereas men put in 2.6. The gender gap widens for those with young children, where work intensity increases with multitasking.

...

But in a paper just published in *Frontiers in Public Health* we argue that breastfeeding is different from other care work: it can't be redistributed, and shouldn't be reduced.

Breastfeeding is an exception

We contend that breastfeeding ought to be recognised as a special category of "sexed" care work that should be supported rather than reduced or reallocated to others. We argue that to undermine women's breastfeeding is profoundly sexist.

Thus, programs such as those put forward by Australia's Women's Economic Equality Taskforce should be assessed on their impact on women's and children's ability to breastfeed as well as on their impact on pay and employment.

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Critical for good health

The World Health Organization recommends breastfeeding children in all country settings for two years or more, and exclusively for the first six months.

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Breastfeeding at work is possible, but difficult.

Even where paid leave is available, women returning to work find it difficult to keep breastfeeding. Substituting formula for breastmilk is common, as bringing baby to mother or bottling expressed breastmilk for feeding at another location requires extra planning, dedication and time.

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Extending parental leave to fathers can help, but not where it is taken separately to leave for mothers or in place of leave for mothers.

Women are consistently persistent in wanting to care for their babies. When Norway increased the number of paid weeks available exclusively to fathers at the expense of paid weeks available to either mothers or fathers in 2018, mothers took less paid leave and more unpaid leave, potentially worsening their financial situations and pay equity.

...

In contrast, leave that gives fathers time to undertake domestic and care work alongside mothers, including as single days, benefits

women, reducing the need for hospitalisations and anti-anxiety medications. Initiatives that encourage fathers to support breastfeeding can help too.

Brushing it under the carpet won't help women

It's unsurprising the Women's Economic Equality Taskforce has entitled its report a 10-year plan to unleash the full capacity and contribution of women to the Australian economy.

...

The contribution that women make through breastfeeding is important. Brushing it under the carpet as part of a drive for equality in paid work harms them, their children and society more generally.

Related link: Breastfeeding and infant care as 'sexed' care work: Reconsideration of the three Rs^[3]

A 10-year-plan to unleash the full capacity and contribution of women to the Australian economy ^[4]

The contribution of breastfeeding to a healthy, secure and sustainable food system for infants and young children ^[5]

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[6]

Tags: gender equity ^[7]

parental leave ^[8]

unpaid care work ^[9]

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Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/23/12/we-won%E2%80%99t-get-real-equality-until-we-price-breastmilk-and> ^[2]

<https://theconversation.com/we-wont-get-real-equality-until-we-price-breastmilk-and-treat-breastfeeding-as-work-216623> ^[3]

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