

The struggle to juggle [IE] ^[1]

An interview with Margaret Fine-Davis, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Gender and Women's Studies at Trinity College Dublin and Director of the Work-Life Balance Project, under the EU EQUAL Initiative

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EXCERPTS Q: What are your views on the dependence on grandparents as childminders? A: Grandparents tend to be relied upon in more traditional societies where women's employment is lower. However, now that women's labour force participation is high and has been increasing in recent years, the availability of grandparents for childcare has been decreasing and will continue to decrease. Young parents will increasingly not have this resource to rely on, since the grandparents (including grandmothers) will be in the labour force themselves. This phenomenon has already begun to manifest itself. Q: While over half of parents see the ideal arrangement as one parent staying at home full-time to provide childcare, this is not always possible because of cost. What are your views? A: It is true this is no longer possible for most couples, because of the need for two incomes, but also because women increasingly want to contribute their skills and talents to the labour force. Women are a very well-educated group and want to use their education in the labour force. Work provides more than just income. It provides a sense of accomplishment, achievement, identity, status and interaction with others. Research has shown that even if they have no financial need to work, a significant proportion of people choose to continue working. While parents may see one parent staying at home full-time as the ideal, that is not the only alternative. For example, both parents could conceivably work part-time or reduced hours (eg three-quarter time) and care for children the rest of the time. They can also make use of tele-working some of the time, so work can be done at home. There are many solutions to meeting the work-life balance needs of parents and the caring needs of children. Q: What should the Government be doing to encourage women to return to the labour force? Or do you think they should be stay-at-home parents for the child's benefit? A: Women are already in the labour force, but they are facing crushing childcare costs, long days at work with long commuting times and difficulties meshing dropping children off at the crèche or childminder, getting to work on time etc. I would recommend several things. (i) Firstly, the establishment a national programme of universal (free) childcare for pre-school age children available to all children (those of working and non-working parents). To take advantage of the existing infrastructure, this could be built into the existing national school system. However, the existing infant class programme should be revamped with significantly smaller class sizes and an educational childcare programme with staff trained in pre-primary education. (ii) There is already a network of childcare centres, community-based and private sector, which have received support from the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP). These should remain as part of the overall provision of childcare. The quality of these centres should be monitored and this should be coordinated by the 33 County Childcare Committees, who should be given greater resources to do this with central coordination at national level. These community-based centres are well-placed to focus on the child care needs of younger children, ie babies to the under-threes. (iii) After-school care should be provided in these centres and also in national schools for primary school children, thus providing 'wraparound' care. (iv) Improving the status of the childcare profession should be a priority. This involves a greater emphasis on training and qualifications and increased salaries commensurate with the importance of the work. (v) The Government and the social partners should work with employers to encourage greater use of flexible working patterns, including part-time work, job-sharing, reduced hours, tele-working and term-time working, so parents can spend more time with their children, especially when they are young. Mothers and fathers should equally contribute to this care. Career advancement should not be impeded by flexible working when people have children. Q: Why are women not availing of additional maternity leave? And why are parents not availing of parental leave? A: Women have not availed of their full maternity benefits because these are not fully paid. Only the better off can afford to avail of them. Therefore, they are discriminatory and not really available to all. Parental leave is also not availed of by many, only those who can afford it. We need to extend the length of paid maternity leave and parental leave to one year in total to encourage mothers to stay at home with their children at least up to the age of one. We should consider extending these benefits gradually to enable parents who wish to stay with young children (up to the age of three), as is the case in France. We should also institute statutory paid paternity leave after the birth of a child for fathers. Perhaps this should be an initial two-week period. Also, fathers should be entitled to some paid parental leave which is theirs and non-transferable - if they don't use it, they lose it. It was found in Norway that fathers only took parental leave if it was paid and earmarked especially for them. - reprinted from the Irish Examiner

Region: Europe ^[2]

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