

Childcare: a universal issue ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Childcare is edging its way up the political agenda, with all parties making offers on improved support. But they miss the point about the quality of care, pay in the sector and universal need

Unequal access to high quality, affordable childcare triggers and intensifies a range of income, gender, and social inequalities. This stems - fundamentally - from a childcare system not up to the task. It is also a result of the way in which the labour market makes demands on our time, conflicting directly with other important aspects of people's lives, such as caring for children.

Our latest **report** ^[2] aims to address these interlocking and entrenched inequalities. It shows how a more ambitious approach to childcare reform could have far-reaching, positive effects on our society and economy.

Childcare is now thankfully on the political agenda. Politicians from all major parties are planning offers on childcare support within their manifestos, ranging from tax credits and childcare vouchers, to partial increases in free childcare provision and 'wrap-around care'.

However, calls for more provision do not address issues of quality, cost and importantly the wages of childcare workers: we do not want to blindly encourage the expansion of an under-valued, low-paid and heavily gendered workforce. Likewise, calls for more financial support fail to address low wages in this important sector of the labour market, or to connect wages with the quality of childcare provision.

We want to expand this agenda and be more ambitious. In our new report, we call for a radical overhaul of childcare provision with three key changes:

1. Improve quality through higher wages and better training for childcare workers, transforming the sector into one that is appropriately valued and less gender-segregated
2. Make quality childcare available to everyone. Childcare is an essential part of our social infrastructure that requires public investment. Universal provision would help break down socio-economic inequalities among parents as well as children
3. Encourage a steady reduction in the standard working week, towards a 30-hour standard for all workers. This will help to make the demands of the formal economy more compatible with the demands of everyday family life. Reducing working hours would allow for men to contribute more to unpaid work done in the home, such as raising a family, and reduce the disadvantages suffered by the part-time, essentially female, workforce.

Figures from our research highlight that substantially increasing pay for childcare workers would be expensive. Our modelling also shows that such a change under the current market system where parents pay for the bulk of childcare themselves would be highly regressive. That's why we're calling for a system of universally provided childcare, either fully or substantially subsidised by the government.

This is a vital investment in our social and economic infrastructure for a number of reasons:

- It would allow more women to remain in the labour market and give them the flexibility to choose career paths that may currently be closed to them.
- It would improve the quality of childcare and help to reduce entrenched inequalities at an early stage.
- It would rid our economy of a low pay sector, raising expectations for formal qualifications, training and career progression and in time work to eliminate the heavily gendered bias within the profession.

Although calls for a universal, better quality childcare system address issues on both provision and cost they remain focused on the structure of the childcare system, rather than on the structure of the labour market. Uniquely, our report argues that the labour market can and should adapt to society's need to give children the best possible upbringing, and to reverse cycles of gender and income inequalities. This can be done by changing the way we value and distribute our time.

That's why we further model how a reduction in working hours would reduce the cost of formal childcare necessary to parents as well as the effects of reduced hours on the overall costs of childcare and on household budgets. Our modelling shows that, when childcare is appropriately valued and priced, shorter working hours may leave households better off.

The case for reducing working hours has been argued by NEF elsewhere. We maintain that this may be an essential element of moving to a sustainable economy that operates within ecological limits. Debates focused on childcare too often assume that it is a good thing for parents to work longer hours, but do we really want to augment a long-hours working culture, based on ever-expanding consumption and

GDP?

Reducing working hours, alongside high quality universal childcare provision, would reduce gender inequality and undermine current discrimination against part-time workers. It would allow fathers more time to spend with their children, blurring gender roles within the household, and help to improve well-being for all through a better balance between paid employment work and family life.

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