

Child care workers should star in higher pay push ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Overheard on the bus on the way to work (and impossible not to eavesdrop since she was sitting right next to me and actually talking, not texting).

"Hi I'm calling you back about Marissa."

Pause.

"Well, let me tell you what I like about her. She's warm. She's educated. She can take your children to the Bronx Zoo or bring them to your office after work. She can do a lot of things that many other babysitters can't."

Pause.

"Well she does some. She does the laundry and empties the dishwasher; light housekeeping."

Pause.

"Well, in my opinion the child care person shouldn't also have to do the housework."

I immediately jotted all this down to capture the ad-hoc, unsettled ring of the whole conversation; the way the parents seemed to be making up the work requirements casually between themselves while the worker herself was out of the hiring negotiation altogether.

More mothers these days are in the paid work force than not.

More fathers, meanwhile, are playing the role of "primary parental unit" as I heard one man describe it recently on Twitter.

And the push is now officially on for good, universal pre-K. As a New York Times article recently showed, it's occurring across the nation, red state or blue. National recognition seems to be growing of the huge importance of early education on an individual's lifelong potential as well as the strong arguments for social investment in early education.

But while parenting and pre-K politics may be getting more co-ed, the stark reality is that the people--over a million of them--who walk into the home and give parents a break or work in day care centers or assist pre-K teachers are almost all women. And, need I add, poorly paid women?

This occupation stands out in a Labor Department chart as the only one without any statistically significant male involvement. (Check it out, a pale green bar represents men in every other of the 20 leading occupations for employed women. For child care, there is no green bar at all; the purple bar representing female workers stands alone.)

A Gap to Consider

In the first quarter of the year, as we advance toward Equal Pay Day on April 8, we are constantly in the wage gap time zone, working our way through the pages and dates of the calendar that represent the extra time that women must work to catch up to men's earnings in the year past.

Strangely, in the case of child care work, there is no pay gap to study, no catchup or any discussion of male-female wage disparities. That's because the field is basically devoid of men.

But there is a gap if you consider some ways in which homemakers are being objectively monetized by say a life insurance policy. A sales brochure that just came to my mailbox notes in a pitch for a "spouse" policy that the person who "stays home" could be performing tasks that would cost about \$110,000 to replace.

Someone who stays home could be performing a wide range of tasks. She could be scheduling and hosting an ambitious, career-advancing social life for the wage earner. Or running the household books to perfection. Or sitting around eating potato chips and watching TV, a la Roseann Barr's "domestic goddess."

But even if you take that \$110,000 wage down by half, it still dwarves the \$19,510 that the Department of Labor reports as the median annual income for these workers.

The weekly median wage of these workers of \$400 places them at the bottom of the pay scales of female-dominated occupations, a long way down from the \$2,000 median weekly earnings of, say, female pharmacists.

The Department of Labor describes these workers as filling in for parents in almost every way; from changing diapers and bathing and feeding the kids to helping older children complete their homework. They are also assisting pre-K teachers in a development phase whose importance is attracting the growing respect of educators.

The skill requirements placed on these jobs may not seem high. There are no educational requirements, for instance. But by other measures--such as the traditional values by which caretakers' contributions are not monetized but still culturally cherished--these workers carry heavy loads. They are responsible for the safety and happiness of their charges, the smooth running of classrooms and households.
Hard, Stoop Labor

The Labor Department's new rule on home care workers will extend to some of these workers, but not all.

If you want to get a sense of how hard this work is, just ask some parents. I worked part time for five years when my children were little. The time I spent "not working" was yes, a time of privilege, emotional gratification and intellectual stimulation (4-year-olds ask stumpers like "why is the sky blue?"). But there's also tons of frustration and hard, stoop labor. When I went "back to work" it felt in some ways like being on holiday.

For lower-income parents, meanwhile, the chance to seek paid employment is currently being stymied by declining public investment in subsidized child care.

A worker-fairness legislative package is firming up. Along with President Barack Obama's "10-10" call to raise the federal minimum wage to \$10.10 there's a batch of pro-family, pro-women bills: the FAMILY Act, the Healthy Families Act, the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act, the Women's Health Protection Act and the Paycheck Fairness Act. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand of New York is touting a five-point "opportunity agenda" driven by the needs of women in the workplace.

Child care workers' leading organizers and spokespeople should be invited to shape this "opportunity agenda" as it plays out in the media. Organizers and leaders can be tapped from groups such as the National Domestic Workers Alliance or Domestic Workers United.

Many babysitters and nannies are doing what was done "for free" in decades past by middle-class stay-at-home mothers whose great unrest energized second wave feminism in the 1970s. As such, these child care workers have inherited the predicament of being too easily forgotten in policy forums, taken for granted by a society that, in fact, can't live without them.

-reprinted from Women's eNews.

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