

What stalled the gender revolution? Child care that costs more than college tuition ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

I am probably a familiar type to you. I went to college, got a master's degree, started a career, married, and had my first child late, at 35. I was working as editor-in-chief of a fiction magazine called *Zoetrope: All-Story* when I became pregnant. The magazine, founded and published by Francis Ford Coppola, had long struggled to get a financial foothold. Under my editorship it achieved just shy of breakeven and earned a number of literary awards. In my last trimester, however, I found myself fighting for my job. During the last month of my pregnancy, on the day of my baby shower, I was fired.

When I was pregnant, I also was the main breadwinner. My husband had just finished his Ph.D. and was on the academic job market. Not only did I have to hustle to find another job while hiding the fact that I was a breast-feeding humanoid, I had to threaten a lawsuit in order to extend my health insurance. I won. Yet I could see I already had lost. My mother's generation—the Gloria Steinem generation of equal opportunity feminists—had fought and failed to create a system for working mothers, i.e., affordable day care for infants and toddlers, preschool for kids, and aftercare for school-age children. Instead, we have ended up with three months of maternity leave, 16 days of vacation, and a hodgepodge of "choices" that depend on whether we have a man, money, or family to help us along.

I was raised by a feminist and pretty much always considered myself a feminist. But "feminist" didn't mean much to me until I was booted out of my office carrying 30 pounds on my belly. Looking back, I now find it spectacularly ridiculous that I was oblivious to a key battleground of American feminism: child care, with its barnacled tentacles around labor, class, and biology.

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What is to be done? If we are stuck with a system that privileges small government (except for military expenses) and low taxes (particularly for the rich), we certainly will never be able to afford subsidized childcare. And if we continue to uphold a corporate culture that pushes workers to sacrifice family time for continued employment and/or higher earnings, care for children will remain in a vice. This vice, as Hochschild points out, devalues human connection and care. It also ignores the vast demographic changes in employment and American families over the last 40 years, and can be used by conservatives and traditionalists to blame women and poor people for society's failings.

Feminism isn't a prominent social movement in this country anymore. And one reason for this is blazingly clear: We don't have an affordable, taxpayer-subsidized system of infant-to-12 child care that levels the playing field for all women, their partners, and their children. What we have is elite women (and men) blathering on about choice, and billionaire executives passing themselves off as role models for working women, while refusing to acknowledge, let alone celebrate the women who help raise their children and manage their homes.

I don't entirely blame my mother's generation for eliding or giving up on creating a system of child care. The political tides have been against them. But it scares the heck out of me that consciousness-raising circles have devolved into Lean In circles (as Sheryl Sandberg calls her female empowerment groups)—and that many women and men have come to accept the status quo.

My plea to the remaining feminists out there is this: Let's find some class solidarity and make government-subsidized child care a campaign issue. Let's identify and vote for candidates who see affordable child care as a legislative necessity. Such family-friendly demands would make sense to low- and middle-income women. They would bring more people back into the feminist fold, and they might even revitalize a movement.

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