

You want a career and a baby? Who do you think you are? ^[1]

Author: Russell, Helen

Source: The Guardian

Format: Article

Publication Date: 24 Feb 2015

AVAILABILITY

[Read Online](#) ^[2]

EXCERPTS

It's not a great time to be a working mother in the UK. Or so you could conclude from the news that one in five parents are considering reducing the amount they work or giving up altogether in 2015 because childcare is so costly. Oh, and just 43% of councils in England are fulfilling their legal obligation to provide childcare for working parents, compared with 54% last year. Central government grants to fund services like childcare are being cut year on year - up to 25% in some cases according to one council source - which means that local authorities will struggle to pay for even these meagre provisions over the next decade. And amid the din of election promises, no party has come up with a compelling and convincing plan for making childcare affordable - mostly because no party has made it a serious priority.

It's as though there's an assumption that, really, women should just stay home and get on with the sticky business of childrearing and then check in again in a few years' time when the next generation has safely started school. These attitudes give politicians the excuse to turn a blind eye to what's swiftly becoming the biggest obstacle to equality in the workplace: women being forced to stop working - when they don't want to.

It doesn't have to be this way. The IPPR thinktank published a report suggesting that an increase by five percentage points in maternal employment in the UK could be worth £750m annually in increased tax revenue and reduced benefit spending. In Scandinavia, the high proportion of working mothers means more tax revenue to fund the welfare state - including tax-subsidised childcare. It's not a coincidence that the Nordic countries where gender equality is highest and there are strong women in leadership positions, are also the countries where quality daycare is most affordable. So why are many in the UK still so squeamish when it comes to mothers going back to work?

Having lived in Denmark for two years now, I was surprised by the judgmental reactions from folk back home when I enrolled my six-month-old son in the 75%-tax-subsidised Danish daycare system. I was pretty much accused of child neglect by a couple: "You want a career AND a baby? Who do you think you are? Gree-dy ..." (FYI: no one has ever said this to my son's father). But as a freelance journalist with a book deadline looming, I didn't have much choice - and I was in good company since 85% of mothers go back to work in Denmark and every child is guaranteed a place in state-subsidised daycare from six months onwards.

So far, there's zero evidence that the children growing up in the lands of Nord, where both parents work and childcare is affordable, have been emotionally or psychologically scarred by starting daycare under the age of one. Norway and Finland both invest heavily in high-quality childcare partially funded by taxes, and in Sweden there's a cap so you never have to pay more than 1,260 Swedish kronor (around £100) per month per child.

In Iceland, parents pay 30,000 Icelandic kronur per month (approximately £150) for 40 hours a week from the time a child is seven months old and it's considered "healthy" for young children to socialise from a young age and for both parents to set examples by working. One mother of two tells me: "Icelandic women would be offended if someone suggested they should stay home instead of going back to work. We're very independent."

Childcare provision varies around the rest of the world.

In the Netherlands, mothers are expected back at work when babies are around 10 weeks old - but only part-time ("there'd be a stigma to working full-time with a small baby," a Dutch mother of one tells me). A childminder will set you back around €90 (or £66) a day and dads, grandparents and extended family often share out the week between them to keep costs down.

In Germany, there's an infrastructure of nurseries that dates back to the time of the GDR that accepts babies from around a year old. Now local authorities provide tax-subsidised nurseries (costing around €200 or £150 a month for 32 hours a week in Hamburg), but there aren't always enough places. Many French women go back to work after just eight weeks ("That's just the way things go there, we think it is normal," one mother tells me) but a French nursery can cost in the region of €700 (around £514) a month for 35 hours a week.

In the US, childcare is costlier still, with nurseries charging around \$2,000 a month (£1,300) in some areas. There's no national childcare programme and maternity leave is at the employers' discretion with many mothers getting just six weeks. One new mother tells me: "My son is barely sleeping more than an hour at a time but we have to send him to daycare at six weeks as we need dual incomes to survive."

It all comes down to money - and in the US, as in the UK, childcare isn't considered a good investment. But this is a grave oversight. The quality of childcare services has repercussions for society as a whole. The OECD has noted that a better quality of childcare service "can contribute to a better start in life for children", as well as "enabling more women to make use of their professional skills, which may otherwise be lost to society". The benefits of high-quality childcare are similar to the social benefits of education. In other words: it matters. To all of us. Even if you don't have children, even if you have no interest in social welfare, this matters. Because these kids will be your future employees, neighbours, colleagues - even your boss. And without it a whole generation of women with voices and skills and useful, interesting, important stuff to say will have fallen out of the working world. And that's something to feel squeamish about.

Related link: Childmind the gap: Reforming childcare to support mothers into work [3]

Region: Europe [4]

Tags: affordability [5]

funding [6]

accessibility [7]

mother's labour force participation [8]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/15/02/you-want-career-and-baby-who-do-you-think-you-are>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/15/02/you-want-career-and-baby-who-do-you-think-you-are> [2]

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/24/you-want-career-and-a-baby> [3] <http://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/14/02/childmind-gap-reforming-childcare-support-mothers-work> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/europe> [5]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/affordability> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding> [7]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/accessibility> [8] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8142>