

If the Tories want better childcare, they need to focus on men ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The other day, I asked my four-year-old daughter what she thought the most difficult part of being a mother was. She thought for a moment and said: "Getting the baby out of your belly." If only.

Sometimes it feels as if childbirth is the political focus of motherhood, too; the government will see you through what is, give or take, 36 hours of agony, and then you can often feel as if you're on your own for the next 18 years.

In fact, the hardest part of being a mother is making choices: figuring out what the options for my family are and struggling when - due to lack of money or time or availability - they really aren't choices at all, just compromises.

The most impossible of all decisions is what to do about childcare. And what burns the most is that this is seen - still, in the 21st century - as a woman's choice: do I work full-time, part-time, or be a stay-at-home mum; get help from a nanny or nursery or grandparent?

This week the Conservatives are celebrating their success in doubling of "free" childcare - via giant banners at the party's conference in Manchester. There are a few problems with this: first, this childcare is as "free" as the NHS - we are all paying for it through taxes, and it's grossly under-funded.

Secondly, a third of the childcare currently funded by the government for two-year-olds is of very poor quality; this isn't a victory for parents if the nurseries being funded are no good.

But what was most worrying to me, as I chaired a panel on "The Politics of Motherhood" at the conference, was that childcare is still being discussed as a women's issue - rather like menopause.

As Sam Smethers, chief executive of the Fawcett Society, argued during our discussion, quality childcare must be considered part of the basic required infrastructure of our country: as important to our society as good roads or a reliable power system; and be regarded as important to men as it is to women.

The way to bring this about is to shift the focus in the childcare discussion from women to men; the Government shouldn't offer funded childcare because it will help women back into the work; it should offer funded good-quality childcare as an investment in the future of Britain.

In her new book, *Unfinished Business: Women Men Work Family*, (read an excerpt here) Anne-Marie Slaughter (of "Women still can't have it all" fame) argues that "If we're going to get to real equality between men and women, we have to focus less on women and more on elevating the value of care and expanding the choices and roles for men."

Like the Emma Watson-fronted HeforShe UN campaign, Slaughter believes that it's time to change men - or "re-socialise" them, as she puts it.

We have traditionally measured the progress of the women's movement by how many female CEOs or MPs we have - and these numbers are important, too - but Slaughter argues that this metric leaves poorer women out of the equation, and it assumes that you need to change women's roles (Lean In!) rather than changing men's.

Public policy shapes women's lives to a frightening degree, because we are still making the overwhelming majority of decisions about household matters. Women in Britain need real choices, so that they can fulfill their personal ambitions, as well as, and in conjunction with, excelling in their role as mothers. And the only way for this to happen is for men to play an equal role in raising children. Slaughter calls for creating a society that values caregiving more - a value that will only be evidenced through the investment of cash.

It's great that the Government wants to offer more hours of subsidised childcare, but this will only be a pleasant prospect for parents if the quality is higher, and if we reposition this as a service as essential to our entire nation as health care is.

-reprinted from The Telegraph

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