

The Women's Equality Party is right – free childcare should be available to all ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The first UK Women's Liberation Movement Conference took place in Oxford in 1970. It was to result in the Women's National Co-ordinating Committee making the following four demands:

1. Equal pay
2. Equal educational and job opportunities
3. Free contraception and abortion on demand
4. Free 24-hour nurseries

Forty-five years later feminists can debate how far we've come in achieving the first three of these. As for the last one, I think we can all agree that we're nowhere near it.

Even with vouchers and a limited number of free hours for pre-schoolers, the cost of childcare in the UK is extortionate. A recent study released by the Family and Childcare Trust shows that nursery and childminder fees constitute a significant barrier to mothers finding employment. Many women return to work after having children to find they'd be just as well off staying at home.

Moreover, the hours offered by nurseries are usually inflexible. You might be able to fit pickups around a nine-to-five job, but shift work, a long commute or a zero-hours contract can make finding a suitable childcare provider impossible.

Enter the Women's Equality Party. This week, the party launched its first policy document, which included a call for "government-funded free childcare for all children at nine months old, with the first 15 hours free and all extra time available at £1 per hour." My instant reaction to this was "thank God someone's suggested it!"

I don't believe for a minute that such a policy will be adopted by any of the major parties any time soon, but part of me is still glad that the idea has re-entered the public domain. The WEP's proposal sends the message that care work isn't just a private matter to be resolved behind closed doors; it's an equality issue, and one with which we all need to engage.

But not everyone is happy. For instance, in a blogpost responding to the proposal Vanessa Olorenshaw argues that the WEP "is giving every impression that women need liberating from full-time mothering, and that only participation in the workforce can lead to 'equality.'"

We come back to that familiar face-off between stay-at-home mother and mother in paid employment. The WEP appears to be taking the latter's side while forcing the former to join her ranks. "It is," writes Olorenshaw, "as though the price to pay for a party seeking to end violence against women is the surrender and trade-off of any 'privilege of motherhood' and the denial of the existence and value of maternal care – for mothers and children, and, indeed, society at large."

I have a great deal of sympathy for Olorenshaw's viewpoint. I too am uneasy with the WEP's casual embrace of gender neutrality in their approach to family policy, as though the transition towards a more equal division of labour can take place without attention paid to more deep rooted power imbalances. The trouble is, whatever policy a party offers can be read as a form of interference, with implicit prescriptions being made for how mothers should raise their children. And as long as we are faced with a broad range of other inequalities – to do with sexuality, class and race – some mothers will have to play by the rules more than others.

How we raise our children is not simply a matter of individual preference, but one in which privilege, cultural values and economic pressures intersect. While feminism's engagement with reproduction is often seen only through the lens of choice, many writers and thinkers – particularly women of colour such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins and Dorothy Roberts – have demonstrated that we also need to look at the issue of justice.

When governments “help” in the raising of children, they can be seeking a way to assume control of the values transmitted to disadvantaged groups. It is not just a matter of them deciding “what mothers should do”; it is a matter of some mothers and children being subject to correction and others remaining exempt.

Last week, for example, the Tory think tank Bright Blue made the suggestion that receipt of child benefit should be conditional upon parents enrolling their children in pre-school education. Clearly such a measure will have no impact upon those not in receipt of child benefit, and the greatest impact on those on the lowest incomes. While children do benefit from early years education, one cannot help feeling that this form of encouragement veers towards coercion. And while coercing parents into sending their children for government-approved indoctrination is perfectly normal – we all have to send them to school – there is the question of where we draw the line. Education and childcare breach the boundaries we set up between public and private spaces and responsibilities. I don’t think this is necessarily a bad thing (but as the kind of mother who is not under a huge amount of scrutiny, that’s an easy thing for me to say).

What free childcare really means depends on the society in which it is embedded. Under the current government, I have little doubt that it would mean that women with children under one would suddenly have “no excuse” not to be in paid work (unless, of course, they were independently wealthy, in which case staying at home would miraculously turn into a virtue). While this may be fine for women in comfortable, stable jobs with regular hours, it would prove hugely disruptive for those forced into low-paid, irregular work. Moreover, the effect on the child would depend not only on the quality of childcare available, but the stress to which the family as a whole was being subjected.

If the WEP want women to get behind their childcare policy, they need to have an approach to employment, wealth disparities and class inequality that would mitigate the potential negative effects of “freeing up” mothers for paid employment (at the moment, broader socioeconomic issues seem to be considered “outside of their remit” of bringing about equality for women, a position which makes little sense). In addition, they need to show an understanding that women of all classes experience caring for their children as more than just unpaid work. To offer a woman the chance of taking a different path is not necessarily a form of liberation. The case for change has to be made elsewhere.

As a feminist I desperately want the unpaid caring work that most women do – both in the UK and globally – to be given a clear value. But however this is arranged, whether through outsourced childcare or through stipends to individual carers, it will involve a form of interference and certain value judgments being passed on what caring is and how it should be done. Moreover, as long as power is not in the hands of those who do caring work, they will not be the ones making these judgments. It will be “the privileged” (as ever, the final say in feminist policy-making devolves to the privileged while feminism shoulders the blame).

I still believe that free childcare can offer more benefits than disadvantages to women and children. The work of raising children needs to be made public, visible and valued, and there are ways of achieving this while still nurturing personal bonds and supporting collective action by and for mothers. Nonetheless, the implementation of any free childcare policy will require compromise on the part of individual women who have their own ideas on how things should be done. The cost will be more than just financial and some women could end up paying more than others. While there’s nothing wrong in reviving some of the idealism of Seventies women’s liberation, we need to be ready to shoulder and share the burden of change.

-reprinted from New Statesman

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