

When Feminist Ideas are Hijacked: How the Demand for Men to Take up Child Care Responsibilities Impacts Formal Child Care Policy.

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Introduction

Women's Liberation and Child Care

Second wave feminists called for a more equal and just society. They demanded the recognition of issues that were traditionally off the political agenda – so called women's issues – from domestic violence, contraception and access to safe abortion to affordable quality child care.

When working class women are fighting to create non-sexist communal childcare, then our feminist revolution will be on its way (Curthoys, 1976, p. 5).

In the 1960s and the early 1970s the women's liberation movement emerged as a powerful social force. The movement at this time, influenced by earlier experience, adopted a particular position about the role of child care and also the role of the state in the provision of child care. Deborah Brennan (1998) acknowledges the reconceptualisation of child care in the early stages of the women's liberation movement: "With the resurgence of the women's movement at the end of the 1960s feminists began to articulate a new approach to child care" (p. 83). In her 1976 *Refractory Girl* article Ann Curthoys positioned child care as central to the feminist agenda and the liberation of women. Curthoys seminal article was based on a paper presented in 1975 at an anarchist feminist conference, and it provides an insight into the relationship between feminism and child care. Curthoys (1976) linked women's oppression with child caring responsibilities and argued that women's achievements in other areas amounted to nothing without the sharing of child care responsibilities between men and women: "Only if the pattern of child care is completely changed can the mass of women be free" (p. 3).

Central also to second wave feminist theorising was the conceptualisation of motherhood as oppressive. This was a view of mothering that was very different to the position held by first wave feminists who saw their roles as mothers as the basis for citizenship rights claims. In 1979 Deagan's comment summarised the alternative view of many in the women's liberation movement:

Among the essential pre-conditions for the maintenance of patriarchal power are the continued supply of cheap, efficient, child raising – commonly known as 'mothering' and the division of women against each other, in a way which prevents recognition either of a common enemy or the strength which lies in unity (p. 6).

Curthoys (1976) argued further "... the present family structure is so oppressive to women that the best personal solution is not to have children" (p. 4). However she acknowledged the dangers of this position – the rise of a group of childless women who do not engage with issues related to child care. This could be particularly

problematic because she saw child care as an essential solution to the oppression of motherhood and family. Her vision was of a strong communal child care movement in which the public and private caring for children is done by both men and women; ‘... a strong child care movement, as a subsidiary or offshoot of the women’s movement, with revolutionary aims, devoted to the breakdown of existing work patterns and the establishment of communal child care’ (Curthoys, 1976, p. 5).

Current Context – with a touch of theory

Today policy discussions about issues that directly impact women’s lives are carefully couched in gender-neutral language. The impact of policy on women’s lives is rendered invisible by the disappearance of ‘women’ into ‘people’, ‘parents’ and ‘families’. Formal child care policy is an example of a public policy that continues to resolutely ignore the different lives of men and women.

The touch of theory

Though it has been critical theorists that have drawn attention to the historical context and political construction of knowledge, it has been critical feminists who have extended theorising beyond the taken for granted boundaries of the public and private – problematizing “... the gender-determined power differential in the intimate sphere” (Meehan, 1995, p. 9). Child care policies are positioned at the nexus of the public and private spheres and often reflect the state’s ambiguity towards women and children. Bennett (2001) argues that the ambiguity inherent in child care policy is not only related to formal child care and women’s participation in the paid workforce but is “essentially to do with power relations between women and men” (p. 40). Bennett recommended Nancy Fraser’s politics of need interpretation as useful for making sense of the highly gendered and contested nature of child care and child care policy.

Nancy Fraser provides a framework for conceptualising the possible impact of linking the public and the private, and also of engaging with the state to meet needs previously defined as private. She maintains, “...when social movements succeed in politicising previously depoliticised needs, they enter the terrain of the social...” (Fraser, 1989, p. 175). This is potentially a problematic course to take. Fraser (1989) argues that the previously private need, in this case child care, will be vulnerable to being positioned by discourses unsympathetic to the vision of the social movement that originally politicised the need.

And the reality is that in the contemporary neo-liberal policy environment “there has been a retreat from state welfare provision to privatised services and a shift from interventionist economic management to free market principles” (Baker, 2008, p. 53). In this environment rational choice is valorised as both an expression of individual freedom and a mechanism that will deliver innovative and responsive services, free from the restraints of government.

Current Child Care Policy

It is a critical time for child care policy in Australia. In 2003 Anne Summers argued that: “There is, in fact, a child care crisis in this country” (p. 4). In 2008 little had changed as the formal child care sector, with the collapse of ABC Learning and the GFC, began to emerge from one of its darkest periods – Australia had “become a case study in how *not* to run child care services” (Brennan, 2008, p.1).

According to UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre the network's concerns are well founded. In a their 2008 report *The Child Care Transition: A League Table of Early Childhood Education and Care in Economically Advanced Countries* Australia was ranked 23rd out of 25 countries. Countries were ranked according to ten "minimum standards for protecting the rights of children in their most vulnerable and formative years" (p. 2). Australia met only two of these minimum standards and only one of the three child care quality benchmarks. Julia Gillard, the then Education Minister, said the UN was "rightly critical of the policy settings of the former government where effectively the market was allowed to rip" (2009, p.?).

There is no doubt that the Howard Government, and the Hawke and Keating Governments before them, encouraged the 'market rules' approach to child care (Brennan, 1998; 2008; Sumsion, 2006) believing that a market driven sector, responsive to parental demand, would ensure accessible, affordable, high quality long day care services. Until recently it seemed that market based child care provision was "pervasive and uncontested" (Sumsion, 2006, p. 102). However, the change from a Coalition to a Labor Federal Government, the global economic downturn and the collapse of Australia's largest corporate child care provider, ABC Learning, all potentially destabilise the 'market rules' certainty. And indeed the Rudd and Gillard Governments have "made early childhood education and care one of its top priorities" (Jarvie, 2008, p.1).

Our Research

This paper will present data from 70 qualitative in-depth interviews with parents and carers in Townsville, Darwin, Mackay and Cairns. The data was gathered in 2007 and 2009. The aim of our two studies was to qualitatively explore, from the perspective of parents and carers who are searching for and using long day care, the impact of the rapidly changing child care sector on their opportunities to access quality child care. The regional context of parents and carers' experiences was emphasised.

Focusing on Women

In this paper we have chosen to focus on the qualitative experiences of women. We argue that current 'family'-centred social policy discourses tend to reinforce the invisibility of women's gendered disadvantage. Often there is no public linking of women's needs to the provision of services, such as child care, that have a great impact on their lives. Further, Bennett argues, 'child care reflects the high degree of ambiguity that the welfare state holds for women ... it reflects the degree to which women are subordinate as citizens and relegated to the private domain as it suits the goals of the state' (2001, p. 35). A woman in the 2007 study also claimed:

This is a matter close to women's hearts. And it needs to be talked about before all the men in power put their spin on it.

Findings

The Respondents

All but one of the respondents who participated in this study were women. Additionally, four women were Indigenous; one woman's child was Indigenous. The respondents had an average of 1.5 children in child care and the children's ages ranged from four months to 13 years. Most women were using part-time care and had been using care for periods greater than two years. The majority of respondents were partnered. Respondents were using community-based child care; small independently owned centres and corporate child care centres.

What Women Said

During the interviews we asked women about the importance of child care in their lives, about the involvement of their partners in child care decisions and what it would mean for them if they didn't have access to care. Women also touched on mothering expectations and the underlying sense of guilt that accompanies the use of formal child care. The example responses presented here today are not unique, but are typical of the experiences of the majority of respondents.

I Had No Choice: The Reality of Child Care Experiences

This respondent had used two private centres ... *looking back the first one that you know she was only at for couple of months um probably met my expectations by about 70% ... The second one, everyday I said to myself get her out of here, get her out of here now. But the reality of lack of alternative care and having to keep her job meant: So and I guess I just got comfortable that she was in child care, I didn't want to ruin that, I did have a job to go to...*

One mother describes her experience of using a casual cc centre: *You want a place where if the child is upset a carer is there to ease them from mum to the day and they didn't really have that there. But it was just really difficult because I had this job and I was supposed to be at work at a certain time.... it was really terrible... I feel really horrible that he had to go through it.*

But I'm not happy. They're there four days a week and it really concerns me... It was the only one with vacancies when I went back to work so I had no choice, but there were no Indigenous kids there ... and worst of all the staff were really rude. They just weren't gentle with the boys at all.

On Women's Shoulders: Child Care, Always a Women's Issue

All respondents agreed that child care was a women's issue: *Because I think the women is still seen as the primary carer, whether the woman is working or not, the woman is still the one that deals with the children, so everything child related seems to fall on women's shoulders.*

I mean the Dads might be consulted on it and have their say, but really it is the woman that seems to make the decision and take the initiative as to what happens with the child care.

I don't imagine many fathers unless they are single fathers would ring up to find out about day care and whether they can get their children in – I would say mothers always do it.

Because that is our job, our societal job is to provide free care and do the nurturing.

Because of the immense guilt and society pressure on leaving children – for mums it's really hard ... You know do I work or do I stay at home – if I've got to go to work how good's the child care? Mums spend a lot of time thinking about their children – how are they feeling, are they happy?

Still Not Good Mothers and Our Old Friend Guilt

I think that some people have the perception too that mothers that put their children in day care when they are little are not good mothers which is really unfair, because some people have to work and they have no choice.

I'm strong, I tried not to let the criticism about child care get to me... that children don't belong away from their family, that if I put them there I was growing them up in a white world, they would never get the kind of love there that they do from family.

... even when you go to drop off or pick up at the beginning and the end of the day it's always the mothers - there are a smattering of dads and that is fantastic that dads get involved, but generally it is the women... I think it is the traditional role that we take... there is an element of guilt even... I don't think they (men) have the guilt.

Discussion and Conclusion

We can see from this data that child care is very much a women's issue and we argue that when we don't see child care as a women's issue the public gaze is diverted from women's very real struggles in this so-called time of 'choice' and equality.

At a broader level, social policy discourses (ie it's all about families) also reinforce the invisibility of women. There is no public linking of women's needs to the provision of the services, such as child care, that have a great impact on their lives. Joanne Baker (2003) argues that this social policy context is shaped by a neo-liberal ideology that promotes 'the privileging of de-contextualised narratives that emphasise self-determination and the elevation of personal choice over considerations of collective good' (p. 1). In this neo-liberal context the emphasis on individual choice means the experiences of women are negated and depoliticised, and personal experience is isolated from the social structures that continue to benefit from sexism.

Key ideas

- We are arguing that the way child care is currently constructed (offered, funded and provided) is significantly different from what women were originally asking for.
- Early calls for government funded long child care were based on a commitment to shifting the responsibility for private lives of child rearing to a shared responsibility between men and women, from the private to public sphere – refer to Nancy Fraser’s implications for moving private business to the public sphere – so that original radical aims are subverted i.e. that community based child care would lead to freeing up women’s time, energy, focus from the intensity of child rearing and lay the foundations for parental equality.
- That such a shift would also support women’s participation in the public sphere, including but not limited to paid and unpaid participation in the workforce – impact of guilt means that having to work is seen as the only real justification for using formal child care and not being the ‘good’ stay at home mother.

Women’s experiences are further complicated by a broader patriarchal context where:

- It is assumed that the child care ‘problem’ is solved.
- Women are seen as being able to have it all: career, motherhood and whatever they require to do either/or.
- Private-public partnerships are valid (assumption private markets can meet the need of child care)
- Rise of ‘intensive mothering’ discourse: women *must* be involved ‘intensely’ in children’s lives or be seen as bad mothers (Andrea O’Reilly)
- Assumptions that child care is for purpose of paid work only (only valid for women if they are ‘making a contribution’ in acceptable ways, such as earning an income)
- Responsibilities, complexities and difficulties with child care are silenced, invisibilised, except between those women who are facing the same struggles at the same time – eg not always safe to discuss child care dramas at work.
- Assumptions: that child care is available, affordable and able to meet the needs of most people.

So to conclude Probert (2002) argues, and we agree, that conservative ideologies are submerged under the policy buzzword of choice. In reality the ideological context is one where the economic rationalist imperative both supports women’s labour force participation (as low paid workers) and the for-profit child care industry, and conflicts with underlying conservative moral narratives about women as mothers. The result has been directionless and contradictory child care policies and services that women negotiate at considerable cost to themselves and their families. A far cry from Curthoy’s 70’s radical vision – “Only if the pattern of child care is completely changed can the mass of women be free” – it seems the patterns are sadly the same.