

Who Cares?

The Economics of Childcare in Ireland

Childcare is central to women's ability to participate in paid work. This article explores the increasing demand for childcare and women's ability to source and retain childcare in the context of the Irish State's neo-liberal approach to childcare provision. This article demonstrates that there are two childcare economies in Ireland—the public government supported and regulated crèche care and the informal, unregulated arrangements of private childminders. Drawing on empirical research,¹ this paper examines the treatment of childcare workers by the State, “working mothers”² and households and exposes the low economic and social value placed on childcare and childcare workers in Irish society.

Women's Employment

In 1973, the Irish Government removed the “marriage bar” (Government of Ireland, 1973), as a pre-condition to Ireland's membership of the EEC and since then women's participation in the Irish labour force has increased dramatically. In the thirty years between 1971 and 2001, the number of women in paid employment rose by 140 percent and, in 2008, 61 percent of women aged between 15 and 65 were employed, which was above the EU average of 59 percent (CSO 2010).

The impact of care work on women's employment is reflected in the fact that women work on average fewer hours than men, and in lower grade occupations. Part-time work is a clearly delineated coping strategy to enable women to deal with home and childcare duties in addition to formal employment (Beechley and Perkins; Coveney, Murphy-Lawless and Sheridan; Murphy-Lawless). In 2008, 80 percent of those working for less than 30 hours a week were women

(NWCi 2009); nearly 41 percent of married men worked in paid employment for 40 hours or more per week compared with 11 percent of married women (CSO 2010).

The increase in women's employment has been stimulated by an increase in the services sector, with flexible forms of employment that are low paid and allow organizations to access skills without the costs of providing secure employment. This type of employment is not necessarily going to benefit the economy and, as James Wickham (36) warns, "there is no inherent link between employment level and reduction of poverty" (36). In 2008, six percent of employed women were at risk of poverty (CSO 2009) and the OECD (2009) reported that in Ireland, 23 percent of women have incomes that put them at risk of poverty.³

Women tend to have more precarious forms of employment, providing flexible forms of employment as the market dictates. Those in precarious employment, outside regular tax and social security networks have been called "the precariat" (TASC 2), which is dominated by women, who tend to have little or no job security, access to sick pay or pension entitlements and receive lower rates of pay than the regular workforce. Many of these women are employed in the service sector and private households as reproductive or caring workers.

Childcare Provision

In an European Union study of childcare in 2004, Ireland ranked lowest in terms of childcare supports and maternity leave. Ireland was ranked the worst of the original 15 member states in terms of public childcare provision (EC). Almost uniquely in Europe, Ireland has virtually no state provision of pre-school childcare and no tax credits for childcare expenses. In *Budget 2006* (Government of Ireland 2006), an Early Childcare Supplement was introduced, which was a grant of €1,000 per year for each child up to and including age five. This grant was available to all children in the state regardless of the employment status of the mother, but it was designed to assist with childcare costs for employed mothers.

However, the Early Childcare Supplement was removed in 2009 (Government of Ireland 2009) which suggests that in times of rising unemployment, there is no further need to facilitate women's or mothers' employment and women's work is less important than the male breadwinner. Since 2010, the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (Government of Ireland 2009) has provided limited free pre-school places. Children aged between three years two months and four years seven months enrolled in playschools receive free pre-school provision of three hours per day, five days each week for 38 weeks. The playschool receives €64.50 for the 38 weeks, which equates to €4.30 per

child per hour. Also in *Budget 2006*, a new Child-minding Relief was introduced (Government of Ireland 2006), whereby a Child-minder who minds up to three children in their (her) own home can earn €10,000 tax free, provided their total income from childminding does not exceed €15,000 in a year. The tax-free income was increased from €10,000 to €15,000 in subsequent budgets, however the limit to overall earnings remains the same at €15,000. This indicates the low value placed on care and on those who do the caring.

The government is not directly involved in childcare provision, and is a facilitator of community⁴ and private⁵ childcare through provision of capital grants to crèche providers. Childcare is uncoordinated, variable in quality and the highest cost as a proportion of average earnings in the EU (PPF; NWCi 2003). Less advantaged parents have access to limited childcare places in community providers, while high costs, inaccessibility and lack of provision mean middle-class families struggle to source and retain suitable childcare.

The lack of state support and childcare provision in Ireland (Murphy-Lawless; Kennedy) has created a situation whereby childcare has been positioned as a private issue for families to resolve themselves. This is what the OECD (1990) has termed a "maximum private responsibility" model of childcare, "in which the joint problems of childcare, family life and labour force participation are entirely private concerns which are left to the individual to solve" (Coveney, Murphy-Lawless and Sheridan 11). In practice, "the individual referred to here is usually the mother" (O'Sullivan 279).

Women are not just exploited in relation to gendered obligations to care for their own children, and to engage and pay for childcare, the majority of paid care workers are also women, who frequently operate in the informal economy with little social protection, and are low paid. An estimated 75,000 children are placed with 37,900 childminders every working day, making it the most popular form of childcare in the State (OECD 2002). However, there is little regulation of this service. Only 229 of these childminders are registered with the Health Services Executive (HSE), as childminders who care for fewer than four children in their own home are not subject to any regulation, mandatory training or Garda clearance. It can be argued that the government's introduction of the childminding tax-free allowance was a measure to draw childminders out of the black economy, rather than to support them. Informal childminding arrangements with childminders who are not registered with the HSE, have had no training and no Garda clearance are concerns for parents. Care arrangements may come to an abrupt and sudden end (OECD, 2002) and there are also concerns for children in the care of these untrained, unregulated childminders.

Because so many childminders are not registered, the invisibility of childminders, both in the formal economy and in society, makes it difficult for

“working mothers” to make and retain satisfactory childcare arrangements, which suit themselves, their children and their childminders. In this study, all childminders are women, and all “working mothers” have responsibility for sourcing, arranging and paying for childcare demonstrating the way caring work is gendered, even if it is commoditized somewhat by being undertaken by paid care workers.

Methodology

Applying a feminist, intersectional research methodology, I conducted a case study in a middle-class Irish suburb that examined the intersecting inequalities and privileges experienced by women who combine motherhood with paid work. I identified research participants as women with children who engage in paid work of any kind and recruited women through the primary⁶ schools in the area, sending participant letters home to mothers in the school bags of the children inviting women to contact me.

The qualitative methods of focus groups and semi-structured interviews were employed in this research project, because, as Gayle Letherby argues, we can enhance our understanding both by adding layers of information and by using one type of data to validate or refine another (96). Focus groups initially explored with women the ways dominant discourses of motherhood, neo-liberalism, feminism and individualism were accepted, challenged, reinforced or resisted and these interactions revealed shared ways of talking, shared experiences and shared ways of making sense of these experiences as well as revealing the range of diversity and difference among participants. I subsequently explored with women their agency, relationships, negotiations and arrangements as mothers and workers with the institutions of workplace, family and society in semi-structured, one-to-one interviews. Interviews were very important in allowing for a “contextualization of experience” (Rose) and a closer look at the multiple dimensions of inequality within women’s lives (Siltanen).

Participant Profiles

In Ireland, the eleven-category Socio Economic Grouping (SEG) classification system brings together people with broadly similar economic and social status and people are assigned to a particular SEG on the basis of their occupational and employment status (CSO 1996). The seven-category Social Class Groups classification aims to bring together persons with similar social and economic statuses on the basis of the level of skill or educational attainment required. The Social Class Group was first used in the 1996 Census and is based on the UK Standard Occupational Classification (SOC 1995) with modifications to reflect Irish labour market conditions. In determining social class, occupations

are ranked by the level of skill required on a social class scale ranging from 1 (highest) to 7 (lowest).

Table 1: Irish Classification System

All participants in the study, according to the Irish Classification System

Socio-economic groups	Social Class Groups
A Employers and managers	1 Professional workers
B Higher professional	2 Managerial and technical
C Lower professional	
D Non-manual	3 Non-manual
E Manual skilled	4 Skilled manual
F Semi-skilled	5 Semi-skilled
G Unskilled	6 Unskilled
H Own account workers	
I Farmers	
J Agricultural workers	
Z All others gainfully occupied and unknown	7 All others gainfully occupied and unknown

are ranked in the top five socio-economic groupings [A-E] and the top five social class groups [1-5]. This study was conducted in a middle class suburb of a provincial city, and in the 2006 Census (CSO 2006), data on the provincial city reveals that 12 percent of females are classified as SEG A Employers and

Managers, compared to 23 percent of participants; similarly five percent of females in the city are classified as SEG B Higher Professionals compared to 17 percent in the study, seven percent of females in the city are classified as SEG C Lower Professionals, compared to 30 percent of participants and 13 percent of females in the city are classified as SEG D Non-Manual compared to 27 percent of participants. Only in SEG E Manual Skilled workers, were participants in the study lower, being three percent in the local study, compared with ten percent in the city. This suggests the middle-class nature of the local suburb, relative to the city of which the suburb is a part.

Women in this study engaged in paid work between 14 and 45 hours per week, and of the sample, 54 percent engaged childminders, 13 percent combined childminders with family care, 23 percent had family-only care arrangements, seven percent combined crèche care with other arrangements and three percent had no childminding arrangements.

Childcare Workers

Sourcing carers who will care for children, physically and emotionally to the level women desire is difficult, because registered childcare is primarily available in the form of crèche care. However, most participants expressed a preference for more personal forms of care and sought individual childminders who would develop long-term relationships with their children. A private childminder is the most common form of care the women in this study utilized. Sixty-seven percent of women engaged childminders either in the minders' home or in the woman's home, or combined childminders with other shared arrangements. "Childminding has been a hidden part of the economy for a very long time, so we're not surprised at the numbers ... it also suits society to have it this way, to have cheap, accessible childcare available" (Patricia Murray quoted in O'Brien 2009).

There is an implication by "Childminding Ireland" (see O'Brien 2009) that because childminders are not registered, they are providing an inexpensive service. There is also an implication that childcare is accessible. It is not. The lack of statutory support and intervention has created a largely inaccessible and inequitable childcare market in Ireland. Caring does not take place in a vacuum; it takes place in a nested set of power, class and gender relations and the moral imperative to undertake care work in all forms is much stronger for women than for men (Bubeck; O'Brien 2005). The division of care labour is gendered and classed and women continue to bear disproportionate responsibility for care work, in the informal world of the family and in the formal world of the care economy (Daly; Folbre; Barry).

All employees working in the formal economy are entitled to legal protection

in relation to unfair dismissal, working hours, minimum wage,⁷ paid holidays, maternity, parental and carer's leave. Women who are engaged as childminders in the informal world of the family do not necessarily receive any of these benefits. Neo-liberal capitalist discourses are evident in the treatment of care, care work and care workers in Irish social policy. Reproductive workers are paid less and have less employment entitlements than productive workers. These are the "precariat", those in precarious employment, working outside tax and social insurance networks with little or no job security, and little or no access to sick pay or pension entitlements or to other non-pay benefits. According to Think-tank for Action on Social Change (TSAC), their rates of pay are generally lower than those of the regular workforce, and unsurprisingly, the "precariat" is dominated by women. As the care sector has grown, women have formed an ever larger majority of paid care workers (Daly and Rake). In keeping with the low value assigned to caregiving in the private sphere, this sector is characterized by low pay and poor working conditions, devaluing the value of care in economic and employment terms (Women's Health Council). Certain tasks are commodifiable though, and there is a case for substantially improving the conditions of its commodification to preclude exploitation (Meagher).

Many women in this study did not see the women who cared for their children in the private sphere of the home as employees, entitled to the legal protection afforded to "working mothers" who work in the public sphere. All "working mothers" in this study also earn more than the minimum wage. The childminders' tax free allowance of €15,000 for minding up to three children in the woman's own home reflects a wage of €7.21 per hour for all three children, based on a forty hour week. This is 83 percent of the national minimum wage and equates to earning €2.40 per hour per child. The net effect of not recognizing the work dimensions of caring is that it "not seen as producing anything of great value, although it does" (Lynch and Lyons, 2008: 176), however, as Ann Oakley argues:

[W]hen almost everything else has a cost and a price, the concept of "value" becomes wholly economic; terms such as "value," "labour," "production," "reproduction," and "work" have all been hijacked into the service of economics. (88)

The most obvious evidence of women valuing their childminders is in the way they regard the issue of payment for the caring service provided. Women who commanded high salaries themselves could afford to pay their childminders' higher wages. Some of these women received loyalty and quality service in return for decent terms and conditions. *"I would say that most*

of my salary would go out on childcare. Definitely. You end up with very little at the end, very little at the end of the month" (Avril, Focus group). Avril pays for childcare from her salary. However childcare is a family expense, not a mother's expense, thus Avril is unequal in the family because of gendered obligations to care. In this research all women spoke of the cost of childcare as their financial responsibility. Evelyn Mahon and Angela Hattery also found that childcare is a woman's expense, not a family's expense. In fact, Mahon found the gendered responsibility of paying for childcare is a disincentive to women's participation in paid work.

There is, of course, an individual responsibility for employers of carers to act ethically and many women do. *"I pay her well and I look after her well, so it definitely works both ways"* (Amelia, Interview). Avril and Amelia describe their satisfaction with their childminding arrangements which they reported had been in place for some time. While there is a hierarchical relationship between mothers and childminders as in all employment relationships, these women demonstrate they value their childminders and the work they do, and they employ their childminders on equitable terms and conditions.

However, other women do not regard childminding work as valuable and either resent or do not pay decent wages, holiday or sick pay.

Well what made me ... very cross, when I actually got her she wanted to be paid for holidays, but I said "no." She was quite demanding about being paid for holidays.... There was a week at Christmas when I only worked one day and at New Year's week when I only worked one day, and I only paid her for the one day, but she cribbed [complained], big time, do you know. But, I don't know. I feel it's dreadful to be paying out a hundred and forty quid when you don't have to. (Florence, Focus group)

Florence pays her childminder €140 for working two twelve-hour days, minding three children. This equates to 67 percent of the National Minimum Wage.⁸ Furthermore, because Florence works two days a week, she has retained this woman to work two days every week. When Florence takes holidays and does not pay the woman, the woman is materially disadvantaged. However, Florence does not see the work as employment, but regards it in a more casual, invisible way. However, Florence is paid by her employer when she takes holidays. Likewise, Yolanda agreed to pay holiday pay when engaging her childminder, but now regrets it, because she sees no return for that payment.

I have a week off at Easter and a week off at Christmas and four other weeks that I can take off during the year, and the arrangement that I made was that if I was off I'd pay her, but if she was off I wouldn't. But I'm

sorry for that now, because I pay her six weeks a year for doing absolutely nothing. (Yolanda, Focus group)

Interestingly Florence sees paying holiday pay to her childminder as *"paying out... when you don't have to"*. Similarly Yolanda regards retaining her childminder by paying holiday pay as paying her childminder for *"doing absolutely nothing"*. No other employment would be so invisible, with no legal entitlement to holiday pay. Both Yolanda and Florence are paid holiday pay by their employers, however, the nature of caring work, being in the home and invisible, does not carry the same entitlements as the formal employment relationships Florence and Yolanda enjoy. This is evidence of liberal-individualist attitudes; it is up to individuals to negotiate the best arrangements for themselves with the labour market. "Working mothers" negotiate the best arrangements for themselves with their employers in terms of pay and conditions, and accept the privilege that accrues to them when their childminders are unable to negotiate better arrangements for themselves. Of those who engaged private childminders, 47 percent described the women who cared for their children as valuable and important, 32 percent described their childminders in neutral terms, while 21 percent did not appear to value their childminders or the work they do. Some women did not regard childminding as "work". Neo-liberal and individualism discourses were evident in the way some women did not recognize or reward the labour involved in childcare, yet were anxious that care workers would do the material tasks involved in caring for children's physical needs as well as ensuring their children's acquisition of skills and knowledge. Motherhood discourses also positioned women as being responsible for the care needs of children. This is a complex pattern reflecting liberal-individualist attitudes and privileging some women by allowing them to participate in paid work, leads in some cases to these women engaging childminders on hierarchically ordered and sometimes exploitative terms.

However, it is not possible to commodify all caring, and women's efforts to commodify the caring that childminding women do, combined with the gendered order of caring, results in childminding women having precarious employment, and results in some cases, in significant tension between "working mothers" and the women they engage to care for their children, because "working mothers" value care when it is done by themselves, but caring when paid for, is neither valued, nor regarded as valuable by some "working mothers." This creates persistent inequalities for all those providing care.

In Ireland, workers who are employed in the care sector have the same status as semi-skilled workers such as bar staff, goods porters and mail sorters, which is the second lowest occupational ranking (Lynch and Lyons 177). If care workers are employed in domestic situations in private households, they are classified

as unskilled workers at the bottom of the occupational ranking index (Lynch and Lyons 177). Informal childminding arrangements are precarious for the minders who have no social protection as they are unregistered for taxation and social security and have no employment rights or protection under the law. It is not surprising, therefore, that “service workers, especially those who have worked as domestics, are convinced that ‘public jobs’ are preferable to domestic service” (Nanako Glenn 22-3).

Eithne’s experience of crèche care is positive and her children are cared for competently and professionally. But, Eithne observed the employees in the crèche where her children are minded cannot afford to take unpaid maternity or parental leave, because care workers generally earn less than other types of workers.

Several of the girls who work in the crèche have had babies within the last twelve months, and they were all back to work after the eighteen weeks maternity leave, they didn’t take any of the unpaid leave that they were offered, couldn’t afford it obviously. And they don’t talk about taking parental leave or anything. (Eithne, Interview)

The women working in Eithne’s crèche may not be very well paid, but they do enjoy employment contracts, and are entitled to all the legal protections afforded to employees. However, like other care workers who earn little, they cannot afford to take the unpaid maternity and parental leave which many of the mothers of the children they care for avail of. Eithne acknowledged she is privileged in comparison with the carers of her children. She could afford to avail of unpaid leave, while the women in the crèche who cared for Eithne’s children could not. There is stark inequality between Eithne and the crèche workers who care for Eithne’s children. Fiona MacKay noted that certain powerful groups and actors benefit from while simultaneously devaluing care because of the way it is not valued in social or political systems. However, both Eithne and the “girls who work in the crèche” are not members of the powerful groups and actors who benefit from devaluing care. The owners of the crèche, to whom Eithne pays a significant proportion of her salary, are the beneficiaries. The “girls who work in the crèche” are paid a fraction of Eithne’s crèche costs.

Conclusion

Women’s caring, both as a personal activity and as paid work is retained as invisible because it takes place in the private world of the family, and care workers when they work in the private world of the family are invisible in the formal

economy. All care work is undervalued and under-rewarded in Irish Society. Public childcare workers have regulated employment, with attendant statutory entitlements, but earn little. Private childminders are treated at the discretion of employing households, and have no employment protection.

That women themselves do not regard caring as valuable is evidence of the persistence of the gendered order of caring. There is a common tendency in policy and research to blame better-off women for exploiting poorer and low income women who care for children. However, as Kathleen Lynch and Maureen Lyons argue, such an allegation is both profoundly gendered and sociologically misleading. Caring is not simply a women’s responsibility, so men in households that hire women to care on exploitative terms are as culpable as their female partners. The powerful groups and actors who benefit from devaluing care in Ireland are the State, entrepreneurial crèche owners, men in households and some employed women. The exploitation of childminders occurs because of weak labour laws and lack of enforcement that allows women to be employed in domestic care situations, without full regulation and proper wages.

The treatment of childminders by some “working mothers” reveals that privileging some women by allowing them into the world of work, while retaining responsibility for sourcing and paying for childcare in the context of the persistence of the gendered, undervalued order of caring, creates enduring inequalities for all women.

¹See O’Hagan. Empirical research conducted with middle-class “working mothers” in an Irish suburb.

²In this paper, I use the term “working mother” to mean women with children who engage in paid work. The term “working mother” is taken in common parlance to mean women with children who engage in paid work outside the home. I acknowledge that the term could be read to imply that women with children who work full time in the home do not work. Women who mother full-time in the home work very hard indeed and also experience inequalities, however these are different from the inequalities experienced by women who combine motherhood with paid work. My research is concerned with exploring the inequalities and privileges experienced by women who combine motherhood with paid work outside the home and I use the term “working mother” in quotation marks to highlight this problem of definition with the word “work.”

³In national data, compiled by the Central Statistics Office, the at-risk-of-poverty rate shows the percentage of persons in the total population having an equivalized disposable income that is below the national “at-risk-of-poverty threshold” which is set at 60 percent of the national median equivalized dispos-

able income. The OECD at-risk-of-poverty rate is calculated by establishing the equivalized disposable income for each person, calculated as the household total net income divided by the equivalized household size. The OECD scale assigns a weight of 1.0 to the first adult, 0.5 to the other persons aged over 14 or over who are living in the household and 0.3 to each child aged less than 14. The purpose of the equivalence scale is to account for the size and composition of different income units and thus allows a more accurate comparison between households.

⁴The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000–2006.

⁵National Childcare Investment Programme 2006–2010.

⁶Children attend primary school for eight years, from age five to thirteen years.

⁷The *National Minimum Wage Act* was introduced in 2000, which guaranteed a minimum wage of €7.00 per hour. The provisions of the act were increased in 2005 to €7.65 per hour, and the rate was increased to €8.30 from 1st January 2007, and is currently €8.65.

⁸€140 for 2 x 12 hour days = €5.83 per hour.

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