

Day-care, the gender gap and work

Submission by *The Iona Institute* to the Citizens' Assembly on gender equality

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Introduction

Relevant to the issue of gender equality is day-care provision. It is claimed that if day-care centres (crèches, etc) become more affordable more women will enter the workplace and the gender pay gap will decline. Immediate questions arise. Who should pay for it? How many parents want to use day-care? How many would prefer to look after their children themselves at home in their children's pre-school years or have them looked after by a relative during the working day?

As we will show, only a small minority of parents wish to place their children in day-care.

As mentioned, an assumption is made in this debate that if more parents have ready access to affordable day-care then gender equality will increase through, for example, reducing the gender pay gap as more women enter the workplace and extend their working hours. We need to examine this assumption. Would more affordable day-care reduce the pay gap? The evidence (see more below) is that it would not. Sweden has readily accessible, affordable day-care but its gender pay gap is the same as Ireland's which does not publicly fund day-care to the same extent.

The State must help working parents. But it should not do so in a way that overlooks parents who do not wish to use day-care. It should not force parents to choose the workplace over home and want a work/life balance that suits them and their children best. The State must be fair to all.

The public's preferred child-care option is not day-care

An Amarach Research poll from 2013 asked the following question:

Below are some possible arrangements for caring for children under five (i.e. not yet attending primary school) during the working day. Please tell me which arrangement you would ideally prefer for your children if circumstances allowed, even if you don't have children under five.

The answers were as follows:

One parent stays-at-home: 49pc

A day-care centre: 17pc

Minded by another family member: 27pc

Don't know or other: 7pc

Comment: Public policy should be a response to what the public actually want, unless there is a strong, compelling reason to do otherwise. Child-care policy is mainly about early-years care because that is when children are most dependent. This question asked people what they regard as the best child-care option for children under the age of five. It finds that only a small minority (17pc) see placing a child in a day-care centre as the best option.

Almost half believe parental care at home is preferable, and 27pc say their preferred option is care by another family member such as a grandparent.

Any policy that favours the minority choice, day-care, over these other choices, is inherently discriminatory therefore.

A CSO paper backs the Amarach Research finding. Published in 2017, the study found that 70pc of children aged 0-12 are looked after by a parent and only 13pc are in a crèche, Montessori playgroup, or after-school facility.¹

Just 18pc of parents wanted an alternative arrangement to what they are using presently, and it should not be assumed this is day-care.

It could be argued that State resources should be funnelled disproportionately to day-care in any case if there is strong evidence that children would benefit more compared with other forms of care. But this evidence does not exist.

An important study from the ESRI called 'Childcare, Early Education and Socio-Emotional Outcomes at Age 5', shows little difference in terms of educational outcomes whether a child was in day-care, or at home, or in some other arrangement.²

This being so, there is no good reason for the State to favour day-care over the other choices parents make about the care of their children, especially when day-care is the first choice of only a minority of people.

Marked male/female differences in work preferences

Another Amarach Research poll, this time from 2016, asked people the following:

Q. If money were no object, and you were free to do whatever you wanted, would you stay at home, would you work full time or would you work part time?

(Men and women with children under 17)

Stay at home: 35pc (female) 18pc (male)

Work part time: 48pc (female) 45pc (male)

Work full time: 17pc (female) 37pc (male)

Comment: This question is identical to one asked in a poll for *The New York Times* in 2013. The purpose of the question is to ask people what their work choices would be if under no financial pressure to work.

The responses show that only a minority of both sexes would choose to work full-time. For both sexes, almost half would opt to work part-time. However, there are very marked gender

differences in regard to who would work full-time or stay-at-home. Only 18pc of men with children under 17 would opt to stay-at-home versus almost twice that number of women. Conversely, twice as many men as women in this category would work full-time.

This marked gender difference directly challenges the notion that men and women, given a free hand, would choose the same work/life balance. Much of the advocacy for universal, State-subsidised day-care is based on this mistaken premise.

The CSO's Labour Force Survey for the second quarter of 2019 showed that 331,000 women were working part-time compared with 130,000 men, a difference of more than two and a half to one.³

Significantly, 79pc of part-time working women did not regard themselves as underemployed. In other words, they were not seeking more paid hours. Their situation suited them.

Social conditioning or natural preferences

Perhaps it might be argued that the differences between male and female work choices are the result of social conditioning rather than natural preferences. Perhaps we believe that with different social conditioning men and women will wish to do the same jobs and for the same number of hours each week and will be equally devoted to both home and work.

But what is this belief based on? Why do we believe it is all socially conditioning, and even if that is true, who should we then put in charge of 'socially conditioning' us and to what end and purpose?

There is no doubt that we are all socially conditioned to some degree, but to put all, or almost all male/female differences down to social conditioning is a theory, and the Citizens' Assembly needs to ask itself whether it believes this theory, and also whether an alternative view should be presented to delegates, namely that there are real natural differences between the sexes that result in different work/life choices. (See for example, 'The Blank Slate' by Professor Steven Pinker, of the Department of Psychology at Harvard University, and especially Chapter 18, entitled 'Gender').

Gender pay gap

The fact that far more men than women work part-time is, of course, one reason why a gender pay gap of around 14pc exists in Ireland. The gender pay gap normally refers to the gross hourly earnings of women compared with men. People who work full-time are more likely to move up the career ladder and therefore earn more per hour.

One way to reduce the gender pay gap is, therefore, to ensure fewer women work part-time, or more men do so. But again, suppose this is not something people really want to do? Has the State

a right to decide that it must socially condition people into making different work choices than the ones they are making now?

What is interesting is that even the Scandinavian countries, which have instituted many policies aimed at eliminating different outcomes between the sexes, still have gender pay gaps on a par with Ireland's.⁴

In those countries it remains the case that far more women than men work part-time and also that men and women are still to be found in gender-typical jobs such as construction in the case of men, or teaching and nursing in the case of women.⁵

Conclusion: The Citizens' Assembly should allow for the possibility that the different career choices men and women make, and also the different balances between home and work that they often strike, may not be solely or overwhelmingly the result of social conditioning and might also be the result of differing natural preferences.

Asking the State to interfere with those choices is itself a type of social conditioning that requires very strong justification. In addition, it may force people down paths they do not wish to go for the sake of a certain vision of society that puts equality of outcome ahead of equality of opportunity.

One manifestation of putting equality of outcome first is a desire to disproportionately support day-care compared with other choices parents may wish to make for the care of their children.

In our view, it would be far better to adopt a more neutral policy in respect of the various child-care preferences of parents. In Finland, for example, day-care is subsidised, but parents who mind their young children at home receive a generous monthly supplement. In other words, Finland respects both choices.

We should do the same.

Notes

¹ CSO, *Quarterly National Household Survey*, Module on Childcare (Quarter 3, 2016). <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/q-chi/qnhschildcarequarter32016/>

² ESRI, *Childcare, Early Education and Socio-Emotional Outcomes at Age 5: Evidence from the Growing up in Ireland Study* (2016). <https://www.esri.ie/publications/childcare-early-education-and-socio-emotional-outcomes-at-age-5-evidence-from-the-growing-up-in-ireland-study>

³ CSO, *Labour Force Survey* (Quarter 2, 2019).

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/lfs/labourforcesurveyquarter22019/>

⁴ EUROSTAT, *Gender Gap Statistics* (2017).

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Gender_pay_gap_statistics

⁵ Alma Wennemo Lanninger and Marianne Sundström, *Part-Time Work in the Nordic Region: Part-time work, gender and economic distribution in the Nordic countries* (2014).

<http://norden.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:707663/FULLTEXT01.pdf>