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Childcare in Ireland Today

Briefing Paper to the Irish Congress of Trade Unions

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1. Background

1.1 Working Party Reports on Children

The question of provision of childcare has been the subject of national concern for more than 25 years. This is evident from the number of Government Working Party reports which have addressed this issue. There were no fewer than seven reports on this topic during the period 1983 to 1999 (Working Party on Child Care Facilities for Working Parents, 1983; Working Group on Childcare Facilities for Working Parents, 1994; Commission on the Family, 1998; Goodbody, Economic Consultants, 1998; National Forum for Early Childhood Education, 1998; Expert Working Group on Childcare, 1999; Department of Education and Science, 1999). Child care has increasingly become the subject of political and social debate (Collins and Wickham, 2001; Fine-Davis, 2004).

Almost 20 years after the first Government Working Party was convened by the Minister for Labour in 1981, (Working Party on Child Care Facilities for Working Parents, 1983) the Government finally created a childcare policy in 2000. This was referred to as the Equal Opportunities Childcare Policy, to which we will refer subsequently. Following the development of that policy, there continued to be an outpouring of reports on childcare from various sources, including the NESF(2005), the National Women's Council of Ireland (2001, 2005), ICTU (2002a) and the OECD (2003, 2004, 2006) among others.

The difference between the period from 1981 – 1999 and the period from 2000 to the present, is that childcare is now on the political agenda. Married female labour force participation had been notoriously low in the 1960s and '70s, by Western standards. Only 5.2% of married women were employed in 1961 and this had only increased to 7.5% by 1971. However, from 1971 to 1981 the rate more than doubled to 16.7%. This created the impetus for convening the first Government Working Party on Childcare Facilities for Working Parents in 1981. However, no significant Government initiatives were forthcoming during the period 1981 to 1999, in spite of the plethora of Government reports on childcare, all of which made similar recommendations. ICTU's representatives on the first Government Working Party on Childcare Facilities (1981-83) included Patricia O'Donovan and Brid Horan. I had the pleasure to participate as an Independent Member of that Working Party. Frustrated by the lack of a Government response to the Working Party Report, Congress decided to focus on childcare in the workplace and devoted their Annual Women's Congress to this topic in 1989. They produced a pack for delegates concerning how to set up a workplace childcare centre and they also commissioned an international literature review on the economic and social benefits of childcare in the workplace (Fine-Davis, 1989).

1.2 Increasing Labour Force Participation of Married Women

Concomitant with Government inaction in the childcare arena, the labour force participation of married women continued to increase dramatically, going from 16.7% in 1981 to 45.3% in 1999. The participation increased particularly for those women in the prime childbearing age group of 25-34 to 66.3%, as shown in Table 1 below. While all women's participation increased over this period, the overall increase was largely due to the increase in married women's employment (Callan and Farrell, 1991).

Table 1: Married Women's Labour Force Participation in Ireland, 1961-2001 (%)

| | 1961 | 1971 | 1977 | 1981 | 1989 | 1994 | 1997 | 1999 | 2001 | 2004 |
|-----------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|------|------|
| All Ages | 5.2 | 7.5 | 14.4 | 16.7 | 23.7 | 32.4 | 37..3 | 45..3 | 46.4 | 49.4 |
| Age 25-34 | 4.8 | 8.8 | 16.7 | 21.6 | 39.0 | 54..5 | 58..2 | 66..3 | 64.7 | 65.5 |

Sources: CSO: *Labour Force Surveys (1971 - 97)*; *Quarterly National Household Surveys (1999-2004)*; *Callan and Farrell (1991)*

Thus, women with young children were now in the labour force “in force” and these children had to be looked after. It finally became apparent that women's labour force participation not only was not taking away jobs from men and school leavers, as had been feared in the 1970s and '80s (Fine-Davis, 1988), but it was in fact significantly contributing to Ireland's boom in the 1990s known as the ‘Celtic Tiger’ (Fahey and FitzGerald, 1997).

The most recent figures illustrate that this trend has continued with 49.4% of married women employed and 65.5% of married women in the childbearing age group (CSO, 2004). The labour force participation rate for all women (married, single, etc.) is also 49.4%; however the participation rate for those in the childbearing age group is even higher at 75.6% (Ibid.). Given the increasing pattern of co-habitation, it is apparent that many mothers with young children fall into this 75.6% category. In view of the increasing participation of women in the childbearing age group, it was predicted in 1998 that the demand for childcare would be likely to increase by 25 to 50% over the period 1998 to 2011 (Goodbody, 1998).

With changing demographic patterns and the need for competitiveness in a globalised market, the impetus towards provision of pre-school facilities has indeed been increasing. While the primary driver for these facilities has been the dramatically increased participation of women in the work force over the last 30 years, and particularly in the last 10 years, fuelling our economic boom (Fahey and FitzGerald, 1997), there has also been increased awareness of the need for flexible working patterns and other supports for working parents (e.g., National Framework Committee for the Development of Family-Friendly Policies, 2001). While supports to workers in their dual role as carers have increased, the scale of what will be needed constitutes a major challenge.

A particular phenomenon at present is the fact that more women than men are now in third level education. Economists see this as having a dynamic effect on the workforce of the future, when employers will have to make accommodations to retain these highly educated female graduates (FitzGerald, 2003).

1.3 Effects of Female Labour Force Participation on Fertility Rates

In most European countries the trend overall has been for decreasing fertility as female labour force participation increases. Ireland has followed this pattern. In line with increasing female labour force participation, the crude birth rate has fallen from 21.8 in 1980 to 15.0 in 2001 and the total fertility rate has also fallen, from 3.3 children in 1980 to 1.98 children in 2001 (Eurostat, 2002). However, those countries with the highest female labour force participation also show the highest fertility (Villa, 2002; Fagnani, 2000, 2002, 2007). For example, while the total fertility in Denmark is among the highest in the EU (1.74), the Danish female participation rate is also among the highest (71.6%). This trend is apparent in other Scandinavian countries. France has an even higher total fertility rate than Denmark, together with high labour force participation of women with young children. Villa (*Ibid.*) points out that “Among other factors, the increasing burden on women, having to continue paid work with family responsibilities, has played a major role in lowering fertility” (p. 16). Yet “those countries which have been able to develop the supply of social services (all personal services, in particular childcare services) and to move towards a more equal sharing of family responsibilities (between men and women) have not only successfully expanded female employment, but they also managed to halt the declining trend in fertility” (*Ibid. pp.* 16-17).

While Ireland currently has the highest total fertility rate in Europe (1.99), this still reflects a significant decrease of almost 50% over the last three decades (see Table 2). In 1970 this rate stood at 3.93. Given these trends, Ireland’s birth rate is likely to continue to fall to be in line with European norms (approximately 1.5) unless policies intervene to change this trend. The current level of 1.99 is already below replacement level (2.1) and if it reaches 1.5, as would be expected, this will be even further below replacement levels.

Table 2: Total Fertility Rate, 1960-2004 for Selected High and Low Fertility EU Countries

| | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 | 2000 | 2004 |
|----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| HIGH | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Ireland | 3.76 | 3.93 | 3.25 | 2.11 | 1.90 | 1.99 |
| France | 2.73 | 2.47 | 1.95 | 1.78 | 1.88 | 1.90 |
| Denmark | 2.57 | 1.95 | 1.55 | 1.67 | 1.77 | 1.78 |
| | | | | | | |
| LOW | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Poland | 2.98 | 2.20 | 2.28 | 2.04 | 1.34 | 1.23 |
| Hungary | 2.02 | 1.98 | 1.92 | 1.87 | 1.32 | 1.28 |
| Italy | 2.41 | 2.42 | 1.64 | 1.33 | 1.24 | 1.33 |
| | | | | | | |
| EU-15 | 2.59 | 2.38 | 1.82 | 1.57 | 1.50 | 1.54 |
| EU-25 | 2.59 | 2.34 | 1.88 | 1.64 | 1.48 | 1.49 |

Source Eurostat (2006), *Population Statistics*, Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, from Table D-4, p. 76.

A low birth rate means that there will be fewer young people to enter the labour force. Thus, there will be a smaller base of workers to support the increasing numbers of older people in the population. This will mean an increase in taxes in order to support old age pensions and health care costs of the elderly. An increase in taxes would be a change in policy in the Irish context, since a policy of lower taxes has contributed to Ireland's economic growth and prosperity. The lower disposable income of the population could lead not only to a decrease in growth, but also to recession and poorer quality of life.

Former Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald addressed the importance of this issue in the *Irish Times* of 9 June 2007, pointing out that "This is a sub-optimal situation, and public policy should, I believe, be directed towards easing the tensions that women experience so often having to choose between work and child-bearing, for example, by facilitating childcare for working mothers – the inadequate provision of which is clearly one of the causes of late marriages and late childbirths" (FitzGerald, 2007).

Thus, childcare facilities not only impinge on working parents' ability to reconcile work and family life, but they also have significant implications for the nation's birth rate and hence future population. This is another important reason why childcare policy is so important for the well being of the country as a whole. As Ireland currently has the highest birth rate in Europe, it is in a good position to benefit from the experience of other countries before the birth rate falls further. In this regard, it should be borne in mind that the Scandinavian countries and France, all of which have provided childcare facilities and other social supports to working parents, have managed to retain a high level of female labour force participation as well as maintain a relatively high birth rate.

2. Importance of Early Childhood Care and Education

All of the reports of Government Commissions and Working Parties which reported in the years 1983 – 1999, as well as subsequent ones, have emphasised the importance of the educational component of childcare.

International research has shown that high quality pre-school education leads to immediate measurable gains in cognitive and social development, which persist through adolescence and adulthood and can have a significant role in combating later educational and social disadvantage (Expert Working Group on Childcare, 1999). The Goodbody Report (1998), summarising extensive international psychological evidence, also concluded that:

"Quality childcare has a beneficial impact on the development of children and especially on disadvantaged children. This impact is enhanced when the childcare provision includes an element of early education. The benefits to children persist through to adulthood and are garnered by the child, the State and society as a whole...

Provision of *high quality* childcare is crucial to obtaining these benefits - they are unlikely to be obtained if provision is

of low quality. High quality childcare is characterised in part by several observable factors - high adult-child ratios, small group sizes, well remunerated and trained caregivers" (*Ibid.*, p. iv).

Longitudinal research, following children over more than 20 years, has shown that investment in high quality early education pays off in terms of later social benefits and economic savings to society - a conclusion underscored both by the Report of the Expert Working Group on Childcare (1999) and the White Paper on Early Childhood Education (Department of Education and Science, 1999).

Successive Government working parties and commissioned reports have both emphasised the value of high quality educational childcare and, in many cases, recommended that there should be a national programme of childcare facilities (see Fine-Davis, 2004). Research on public attitudes in Ireland has also indicated a high level of support for state supported preschool education for more than 20 years (Fine-Davis, 1983a, 1983b; Fine-Davis, McCarthy, Edge, & O'Dwyer, 2005a).

3. Provision of Childcare in Ireland

3.1 Extent and Type of Care

Data based on a survey module on childcare included in the National Household Survey in late 2002 illustrates the patterns of childcare use in Ireland (CSO, 2003). Over 73,000 families, or 42.5% of all families with pre-school children relied on childcare provided by someone other than the parents during working hours. Not surprisingly, it was found that couples where both partners were at work had the greatest need for childcare. Over three-quarters (55,300) had some form of childcare arrangements for their preschool children (CSO, 2003). In 2005 the number of families with with pre-school children who relied on non-parental childcare arrangements during the normal working day was 82,600 (CSO, 2006), a significant increase over the figure for 2002. The type of care was distributed as follows in the case of both parents working:

Table 3 Non-Parental Childcare Arrangements for Pre-School Children of Employed Couples

| Childcare Arrangement | 2002 % | 2005 % |
|------------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Unpaid relative | 28.5 | 27.7 |
| Paid relative | 12.6 | 11.9 |
| Paid carer | 33.2 | 33.6 |
| Crèche/Montessor | 22.1 | 23.3 |
| Other | 3.5 | 3.6 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Based on CSO (2003) Table 3; CSO (2006), Table 3a

It may be seen from Table 3 above that the majority of preschool children of working parents are cared for by a paid carer, which is generally a childminder. This proportion went from 33.2% in the 4th Quarter, 2002 to 33.6% in the 1st Quarter, 2005 (CSO, 2003, 2006). A high proportion in both time periods was also cared for a relative who was generally unpaid (28.5% in 2002 and 27.7% in 2005) or less often paid (12.6% in 2002 and 11.9% in 2005).

What is striking about this table is that only 22.1% of children in 2002 and 23.3% of children in 2005 were cared for in crèches or childcare centres, such as Montessori. This suggests that either there were not enough childcare facilities available or their cost was too high. The high level of care provided by relatives (both paid and unpaid) shows how family members, often grandparents are drafted into childcare.

The 2002 survey found that just under 20% of families with preschool children would welcome the availability of alternative childcare arrangements. Around half of these would like a crèche or Montessori, preferably work-based. Over 45% said they were not availing of their desired option due to the cost and 33.5% said the option was not available (CSO, 2003.). In a much earlier nationwide study in Ireland it was found that parents often did not avail of their preferred mode of childcare (Fine-Davis, 1983b).

3.2 Cost of Childcare

The average weekly cost of childcare for families with pre-school children only was €05.36 nationally in Q4, 2002 and €120 in Q1, 2005; the comparable cost in Dublin was over €131 in Q. 4 2002 and €145 in Q1, 2005. The increase in the cost of childcare nationally was 23% in the 2 – year period between the two surveys – an increase of 20.1% for school going children and 27.3% for preschool children (CSO, 2006).

This shows that the increase in the cost childcare was significantly higher than the rate of inflation, which ranged from about 1.8 to 3.8% in 2003-2004 (Department of Finance, 2003, 2004). Assuming the rate of increase in preschool childcare was 13.6% per annum (27.3% divided by two) this is almost five times the average rate of inflation in 2003-4.

The CSO (2006) says that when parents required more than 40 hours of childcare the average cost was €184 per week. It can easily be seen that one preschool child could require 40 or more hours of child care if their parents worked full time. If the parents had two preschool children the cost would be €368 per week. With a Government subsidy of €50 per week per child (from Child Benefit and the childcare allowance of €1,000 for children 5 and under) this comes to a net cost to parents of €268 per week or over €1,000 per month for childcare.

Should those two full-time working parents live in Dublin, the cost is even higher. At €15.15 per hour, 40 hours of child care for preschool children costs €206 per week and full time childcare for two preschoolers costs €412 per week. Subtracting the Government subsidy of €50 per child per week, the parents still have a net childcare bill of €312 per week or over €1250 per month in childcare costs. It is no wonder the birth rate is going down.

4. Views of the Social Partners on Childcare

The Social Partners have expressed concern about childcare supply, quality and cost over many years.

Launching the results of ICTU's Survey on Members' Childcare Needs in April 2002, Joan Carmichael, then Assistant General Secretary, stressed that "action on childcare must be seen as a priority area for Government. Government must address the cost of childcare to ensure its affordability for parents . . . What is needed now is the identification and implementation of an appropriate mix of measures to increase childcare supply and make the cost affordable for parents" (ICTU, 2002b).

David Begg, General Secretary of Congress, in his address to Ambassadors of EU and Accession countries (Begg, 2004) on "Time to get Serious about the Lisbon Strategy" stressed the need to build social infrastructure particularly relative to care of children. He drew attention to the "currently huge differences in the quality and availability of childcare in different European countries. Ireland, for example, could not be remotely compared to Denmark because we have no effective public policy on childcare."

More recently, Begg has said that "The market has failed to deliver on care. In fact, all it has delivered are higher prices, poor access and uneven quality." He has said that "care had to be approached in a strategic and holistic fashion with the creation of a national 'infrastructure of care' now an urgent priority. In policy terms, care must assume the status of a 'public good' similar to that enjoyed by education" (ICTU, 2006).

He predicted that "the consequences of failing to do so will be severe and do long-term social and economic damage." He further predicted that "faced with such costs people will either leave the workforce or choose to limit their families, leaving the future Irish economy wholly dependent on migrant workers to meet labour supply" (*Ibid.*). It can a

IBEC has also expressed concern about the lack of childcare provision in relation to needs of the labour force for some time (e.g., IBEC, 1998). More recently, its Director General, Turlough O'Sullivan in the *Foreward* to the recent IBEC Education Policy document, *Education for Life – The Challenge of the Third Millennium* (2004) points out that "there is universal agreement that investment in education has been one of the key contributors to the economic success of recent years" (p. 1). The Policy Document further states that "a properly resourced and co-ordinated pre-school programme is an essential precursor to the primary school system and would benefit all families – regardless of whether one, both or neither parents are working" (p. 10).

5. Views of Other National and International Bodies

Various other national and international bodies have issued reports and submissions on childcare. These include international organisations such as the OECD and national organisations such as the National Women's Council of Ireland, the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) and the Chambers of Commerce of Ireland

The OECD has pointed out that “maternal labour force withdrawal, even if not permanent, involves considerable (opportunity) costs for the society as a whole” (2003, p. 119). As demographic trends are showing a decline in birth rates, the OECD advocates policies that reduce the “indirect costs for mothers to work by offering affordable quality childcare, regular part-time employment opportunities and, generally, making the labour market more inclusive. . .” (*Ibid.*, p. 120).

In a comparative study of childcare in Ireland, Japan and Austria, the OECD (2003) confirms that childcare is more costly in Ireland than in either of these two countries, in fact it is twice as high (p. 181). Not only that, but Irish childcare costs are not income related, as they are in these countries. Even more worrying is that for a lone parent with average earnings living in Dublin “the cost of childcare for one child is equivalent to 30% of after-tax net income, and it would be another 30% for a second child (OECD, 2003, p. 148).” Thus they point out that “childcare costs can be a barrier to work in Ireland” (*Ibid.*).

This has particular implications for women, as the National Women’s Council of Ireland (2001) points out, citing the Expert Working Group on Childcare (1999) “The availability and cost of childcare and the difficulties around reconciling employment and family lives are the most significant barriers to women accessing and participating in the labour force.”

A concrete example of this at a local level was pointed out in the Submission to The Forum on Educational Disadvantage by An Cosán (2003), a development of the Shanty Project in Tallaght West. They report that 48% of women who wish to return to education with them are unable to take up the place offered as they cannot afford quality childcare. There are no local childcare facilities available except for those provided by An Cosán for women wanting to return to education or take up employment and these are very limited.

The situation described above has particular implications for single parents, in that a very high proportion of single parents in Ireland are not employed. Unemployment in this group is 55% in Ireland (OECD, 2003, p. 188). It was further pointed out that lone parents have particular constraints because they have less time available due to lack of support from a partner. They are also a relatively high poverty risk because of low educational levels together with low employment rates (*Ibid.*, p. 192). For most lone parents, social welfare is their principal or only source of income. For those who work part-time, there is a risk that beneficiaries “become content with an intermediate position, combining some benefit and some earnings on a long term basis” (*Ibid.*, p. 196). Unless such women are helped out of this poverty trap, the cycle of poverty is likely to be perpetuated into the next generation.

The OECD concludes that “There is a need for earlier intervention in Ireland of a more active nature towards OPFP (One Parent Family Payment) – clients with very young children, including childcare support, while for the existing long-term clientele comprehensive measures to upgrade skills are likely to be necessary” (*Ibid.*, p. 199). They further point out that “While the Irish tax/benefit system largely supports the work/care choice, this is countered by expensive childcare for those without access to other arrangements, to the extent that it may not be financially worthwhile for second earners to work” (*Ibid.*, p. 200). This will act as a deterrent to further maternal

employment, as informal modes of childcare become less and less available. Thus, women with young children, both lone parents and those in relationships are vulnerable to social exclusion from the labour market because of the lack of affordable childcare.

This also has implications for businesses. According to Tom Clarke, President of Chambers of Commerce of Ireland (2003), “A glaring anomaly currently exists in the economy. On the one hand, businesses, particularly SMEs, are coming under increased pressure to source suitable staff from a rapidly vanishing pool of available labour. Yet, on the other hand, women in particular are being blocked from entering the labour force due to the lack of accessible and affordable quality childcare.”

The National Economic and Social Forum (NESF, 2005) recently published a report entitled “Early Childhood Care and Education.” It begins by asking why there should be a need for another report on childcare, given that a sequence of major reports preceded it. Their answer is: “the very inadequate implementation of policy which has occurred and the very insufficient financial investment in the education and care of our younger citizens” (p. ix).

In spite of the concern expressed by numerous national and international bodies, the National Women’s Strategy issued recently by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (2007) is very vague about childcare. It states that “the availability of quality and affordable childcare . . . has long been cited as a key element to support working mothers and those mothers who wish to undertake retraining to enable them to re-enter the labour market.” It also lists as Objective 5-A “To ensure that childcare services are optimal to meet the needs of parent and child alike.” However, there is no mention of *provision* of childcare in the entire Strategy.

6. Public Attitudes to Childcare

Public attitudes to child care are also highly relevant to this issue. These have been studied over time in attitudinal surveys.

Irish attitudes to social policies that would support working parents, such as attitudes to flexible working, public provision of childcare, and tax relief for childcare expenses, were very progressive, even two decades ago (Fine-Davis, 1983a, 1983b, 1988b) and continue to be so today (Fine-Davis, McCarthy, Edge & O’Dwyer, 2005a).

A high level of support was expressed in a 1981 study for a national programme of childcare facilities for pre-school children (Fine-Davis, 1983b). Over 90% of the sample favoured such a policy. A comparable level of support was expressed by married women in a 1986 survey (Fine-Davis, 1988b). Ninety per cent of employed married women said they would favour such a policy: 54% were strongly in favour and 44% said such a programme could apply to them. Support was also quite strong on the part of non-employed married women: 88% favoured such a policy (42% strongly) and 48% saw it as applicable to them. Married men were also quite supportive: 81% favoured such a policy (40% strongly) and 50% said it applied to them.

In the 1981 survey (Fine-Davis, 1983b) 88% of married women favoured tax concessions for child care costs. A similar degree of support was expressed in the 1986

study (Fine-Davis, 1988b). There was also strong support from non-employed married women (81% favoured this policy) and from married men, of whom 83% supported the policy. The latter group were most likely to see this as applicable to them (57% did so).

These data, which are more than 20 years old, show how patient Irish people have been in waiting for public childcare facilities. The data also reveal a great consensus among employed and non-employed married women and married men. There is no dissent between employed and non-employed married women on these issues, as is sometimes made out to be the case. This myth is often used as a rationale for not providing public services out of fear that this would offend non-employed married women or “women in the home.” Such a fear is not reality based. Research not only shows that these groups share similar attitudes on these matters, but also shows that these are not two distinct groups. Women move in and out of the labour force depending on their circumstances.

A more current nationwide survey carried out in 2004/5 found that 92% of the sample agreed that “there should be a national programme of childcare facilities for pre-school age children. Of these, 54.6% strongly agreed. Strongest support was from those in the age group 35-49.

In comparing attitudes in the late 1970s with attitudes very recently, it is also possible to see how the public feel about responsibility for funding childcare. The same question was asked of a nationwide representative sample in 1978 (Fine-Davis, 1983a) and again in 2004 - 26 years later (Fine-Davis et al., 2005a) concerning who should assume primary responsibility for financing childcare facilities: the Government, employers, parents or a combination of these. As can be seen from Table 4 below, perceptions have changed only slightly in the 26 years since these data were collected.

In both 1978 and 2004/5 the largest proportion felt childcare centres should be financed by a combination of Government and employers, Government and parents or Government, employers and parents. About one-third of the sample (33.6%) in 1978 favoured one of these combinations. By 2004/5, the support for a combination had doubled to 66.3%. The greatest support was and is for a combination of Government, employers and parents: 19.3% favoured this option in 1978 and 31.5% favoured it in 2004/5. The next highest level of support was for Government alone to support childcare facilities. This was supported by 28.6% in 1978 and 23% in 2004/5. It is notable that whereas in 1978 12.5% were not sure who should fund childcare or else they felt it should not be supported at all, this dropped to only 4.5% in 2004/5, indicating that people now have clearer ideas about childcare policy and see it as legitimate.

Table 4: Perceived Responsibility for Financing of Childcare Centres: Comparison of Nationwide, representative samples, 1978 and 2004/5

| | 1978 (N = 1,852) % | 2004/5 (N = 1,204) % |
|---|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| The Government | 28.6 | 23.0 |
| Employers | 2.1 | 1.5 |
| Parents | 13.2 | 4.7 |
| Combination of Government & Employers | 7.4 | 18.7 |
| Combination of Government & Parents | 11.3 | 11.8 |
| Combination of Employers & Parents | 5.6 | 4.3 |
| Combination-Government, Employers & Parents | 19.3 | 31.5 |
| Not sure | 7.4 | 4.3 |
| Shouldn't be supported at all | 5.1 | 0.2 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 |

SOURCES: (1983a) and Fine-Davis, McCarthy, Edge & O'Dwyer (2005a)

The same question was asked of a nationwide representative sample of 1,021 mothers with at least one child aged between 0 and 15 in 1981, and these responses are compared in Table 5 below with all women in the 2004/5 study with a child aged between 0 and 12. Over 40% of mothers with dependent children surveyed in 2004/5 felt that the Government, employers and parents together should finance childcare centres, while only 24.0% of those in 1981 recommended this option. A similar proportion of respondents (26%) in both studies felt that the Government alone should pay for childcare centres. The proportion of respondents who felt that parents alone should pay for childcare centres dropped substantially between 1981 and 2004/5. While 9.7% of respondents in 1981 felt parents alone should pay for childcare centres, just 2.2% in 2004 felt this way.

The attitudes of mothers do not appear to differ a great deal from that of the whole population. Funding by a combination of the Government, employers and parents was the option given the most support by all respondents in 2004 (31.5%), the same was given the most support by all mothers with children aged 0-12, although by a larger margin - 42.6%.

It is thus clear that there is strong support for Government to take a major lead in funding childcare centres, but there is also a view that employers and parents should also contribute to funding. An analysis of all responses suggests that the public see parents' role in contributing to funding as second to that of Government, with employers' role coming third.

Table 5: Perceived Responsibility for Financing of Childcare Centres: Comparison of Sample of Mothers with at least one Child aged 0-15 (1978) and 0-12 (2004/5)

| | 1981 (N = 1,020) | 2004/5 (N = 136) |
|--|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| The Government | 26.4 | 26.5 |
| Employers | 1.6 | 0.0 |
| Parents | 9.7 | 2.2 |
| Combination of Government & Employers | 8.7 | 13.2 |
| Combination of Government & Parents | 19.7 | 12.5 |
| Combination of Employers & Parents | 7.5 | 2.9 |
| Combination of Government, Employers & Parents | 24.0 | 42.6 |
| Not sure | 2.0 | 0.0 |
| Shouldn't be supported at all | 0.5 | 0.0 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 |

SOURCES: (1983b) and Fine-Davis, McCarthy, Edge & O'Dwyer (2005a)

7. Government Childcare Strategy – 2000 to the Present

The initial major Government initiative in the childcare area was the Equal Opportunities Child Care Programme. Funded by the Irish Government and the European Union, this Programme made available €436.7m to increase the supply and quality of childcare throughout Ireland as part of the National Development Plan 2000-2006 (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2003). The main objectives of the Programme were “to improve the quality of childcare; to maintain and increase the number of childcare facilities and places and to introduce a co-ordinated approach to the delivery of childcare services” (*Ibid.*). The Programme provided grant assistance for capital developments to private childcare providers, self-employed providers and to community based child care facilities. It also provided for staffing support in disadvantaged areas. In addition the Programme established 33 County and City Childcare Committees throughout the country “to develop and implement co-ordinated strategic plans for childcare provision within their local area” (*Ibid.*).

In this context, elements of the Social Partnership Agreement 2003-2005, *Sustaining Progress* (Department of the Taoiseach, 2003), stated that as part of the broader strategy for development of childcare provision, the current National Childcare Strategy “will be augmented to achieve the objective of making childcare affordable for working parents in low-paid employment by increasing the provision of good quality childcare” (p. 27). The Partnership also agreed that a Partnership sub-committee, with representatives of Government, ICTU and IBEC, be established under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP), with a secretariat provided under the Programme. This sub-committee would consider recommendations on how to improve the availability of quality childcare for working parents and how the supply of pre and after school care can be accelerated (*Ibid.*, pp 89-90). This Partnership issued a report in 2005 (IBEC/ICTU Subcommittee, 2005).

According to the National Employment Action Plan Ireland, 2003-2005 (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2003), there was still much that needed to be done, as illustrated by this statement:

Government funding for affordable childcare has yet to yield any significant gains for women returning to the workforce and remains one of the biggest obstacles to attaining the EU targets of 57% of women in the labour force by 2005 and 60% by 2010. A flexible childcare system needs to be established that would facilitate parents working outside 9 –5 working day and those participating in adult education or mainstreaming education and training. It should be provided in a range of formats not just crèche based, but also increased emphasis on provision at community level and within the workplace.

In spite of the arguments put forward in numerous commissioned reports for a coherent, high quality childcare programme, the thrust of current childcare strategy in Ireland has been to subsidise existing childcare services in the community and to only directly provide services to the disadvantaged. Child Benefit Allowance has also been increased substantially in recent budgets, which, it is argued gives parents choice in terms of childcare, applies to all income groups and to both employed and non-employed mothers. However, Child Benefit is also a measure to reduce child poverty and in this sense it may be used for other life necessities rather than targeted at childcare costs.

By reducing taxes in the 1999 and 2000 Budgets, and to a lesser extent in the 2001 Budget, the Government increased the take-home pay of workers so that they would be better able to afford to pay for childcare. Individualisation in the tax system also increased the relative take-home pay of working parents.

In December 2005, the Minister for Finance introduced a 5-Year National Childcare Investment Programme, costing €75m to run from 2006 – 2010. This programme is to support the creation of an additional 50,000 childcare places. This is to be achieved through capital grant aid to private providers and to community groups, building upon the previous Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme. In addition there will be training of 17,000 childcare workers who are due to be employed in the sector over the next five years (O'Brien, 2006). Additional initiatives included a €1,000 per annum childcare payment for each child under six, introduced in 2006.

Extensions to paid and unpaid maternity leave were announced in the 2006 Budget for 2007, bringing the level of paid maternity leave to 26 weeks and the level of unpaid leave to 16 weeks. This is in addition to the existing 14 weeks unpaid parental leave. Thus parents will be entitled to 56 weeks of paid and unpaid leave (Cowan, 2006).

8. Current Child Care Provision in Comparative Perspective

8.1 Expenditure on Preschool Education

In spite of the Government's childcare strategies, international assessment of Ireland's performance in the childcare sphere is less than wholeheartedly positive. According to a major recent report by the OECD (2004), *Education at a Glance*, spending on education in Ireland has failed to keep pace with recent economic growth. The amount spent on primary and secondary education is lagging behind that of other countries. Ireland ranks lowest of 30 countries surveyed in terms of amount spent on primary and secondary education. Our expenditure on primary education compares least favourably. Responding to these findings, the Minister for Education commented that "In particular we need to focus on increasing the resources we allocate to primary education since this is the area where our expenditure compares least favourably with that of many of the countries reported on by the OECD" (*Irish Times*, September 15, 2004, p. 6).

The OECD Report shows that we have had the greatest increase in GDP of 26 countries compared – however our change in total expenditure on education did not match this. In examining expenditure on pre-primary education (for children age 3 and older), Ireland's expenditure is negligible and the lowest of all of the EU countries which the OECD examined. For example, in Denmark expenditure on pre-primary education is 0.8% of GDP, in France it is 0.7%, in Germany and Belgium it is 0.6%, in Italy and the U.K. 0.5%. Even the accession countries spend more of their GDP on pre-primary education than we do: Hungary spends 0.7% of their GDP, the Czech and Slovak Republics each spend 0.5%. and Poland, 0.4%.

8.2 Deficiencies in Current Government Policy

8.2.1 Consistent Quality

While the Budget measures of 1999 to the present may have been helpful in the short term in terms of stimulating the provision of childcare places and in helping to subsidise childcare costs, they have not moved Ireland any closer to having the kind of comprehensive, integrated national programme of childcare facilities evident in some other European countries such as France and Denmark. The funding allocated in the recent budgets, to provide capital grants and staffing grants have gone and will continue to go primarily to private sector childcare and also to community based groups. Yet, the variety of kinds of childcare is enormous and one must ask how consistent can the quality of such a diversity of childcare provision be?

This is of particular concern given the recent findings of inspections of childcare centres. In a recent report of health inspections of childcare centres throughout the country numerous worrying things emerged, from the risk posed to children in a Co. Tipperary preschool from "an electric fence on either side of an outdoor play area", as well as "foul odours coming from a fridge". An inspection of a facility in Kilkenny found "three children sleeping in cars seats rather than cots, prompting concerns about hanging". In the freezer "raw meats were being stored beside ready to eat ice cream". Children were also observed "playing with uncovered electric sockets." Children in a Co. Donegal creche were "being left in front of television without verbal communication from an adult." These examples were identified from more than 100

inspections released by the HSE in response to a request under the Freedom of Information Act. (*Irish Times*, 28 November, 2006).

Another worrying aspect of current childcare policy in Ireland is that in the childcare sector, no qualifications are required. It is not currently necessary to have any formal qualifications to own, manage or work in childcare in Ireland. It is estimated that 30% of childcare staff in Ireland are without any qualifications (OECD, 2006). This is something which was addressed by the Social Partners ((IBEC/ICTU Subcommittee, 2005) and by the OECD (2006). For example, the OECD (2006) points out that only 30% of childcare staff in Ireland are trained. Emphasis is placed by the OECD and also by the Social Partners on the need for more training of childcare personnel and also of childminders.

Staff-child ratios are also far higher than is recommended by best international standards.

8.2.2 Cost

In addition to the need for consistent quality through a coordinated national childcare strategy, the issue of cost still remains. Childcare costs in Ireland consume a higher proportion of working parents' earnings than in any other EU member state (Langford, 1999; *Irish Times*, 17th May 2001, p. 3). Childcare costs are so high that people, especially those on lower wages, have to spend a very significant proportion of their take-home pay on childcare. According to the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, childcare costs for working parents more than doubled from 1998 to 2001 (Yeates, *Irish Times*, 6 August 2001, p. 7). Moreover, tax relief for childcare expenses is still not available. As noted above, childcare costs increased five times the rate of inflation over the two year period from late 2002 to early 2005.

8.3 Overlap of Responsibility

Hayes (2002) points out another difficulty in relation to recent Government childcare policy, that of overlap of responsibility by several Government Departments. Referring to the White Paper prepared by the Department of Education and Science, *Ready to Learn* (1999) and the *National Childcare Strategy* (Expert Working Group on Childcare, 1999), prepared by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Hayes points out:

The fact that two government departments would produce two separate strategies for childcare/early childhood education in the same year is an example of the difficulty policy-makers seem to have when addressing policy issues that concern in the main, the same-population children. The PPF continues this trend by locating co-ordination of responsibility for childcare within the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, while identifying the Department of Education and Science as responsible for developing early childhood education. Where there is no clear lead department in the sector, the likelihood of inefficiency and overlap is increased. Contradictory departmental strategies impacting on the same populations, lead to confusion in terms of policy responsibility. This, in turn, leads to a fragmented policy response in relation to the same policy issue, in this case the development and support of early childhood services for children. Strong government leadership is necessary to reconceptualise the childcare issue. (p. 70).

While stressing that there has been much progress in developing childcare and the early childhood education sector over the last few years, particularly in relation to funding and supply, Hayes points out that

The fact that policy is being driven by different agendas, under the direction of different government departments continues to hinder the development of an integrated policy for the support of high quality early childhood services for all young children.” (*Ibid.*, pp. 71-72).

Since Hayes wrote in 2002 we have seen the establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children located in the Department of Health. This has helped to increase coordination which previously had been under no fewer than seven government departments (OECD, 2006). However, it still remains the case that early childhood care and education is in the Minister’s Office, whereas preschool education (the infant classes for four and five year olds) is in the Department of Education and Science, so there is still a lack of full coordination.

9. The Role of Men in Childcare

9.1 The Role of Fathers

Research has shown consistently that men do not contribute to the domestic and childcare tasks as much as women do and women consequently have a significantly greater dual burden (Eurostat, 2001; Villa, 2002; Fine-Davis, *et al.*, 2004). This undoubtedly contributes to the twin track system in which women are more likely to choose, of necessity, flexible arrangements involving shorter hours (Drew, Humphreys and Murphy, 2003). As O’Callaghan points out, “Further advances by women and mothers in particular may depend on the extent to which fathers take up their caring responsibilities, thus freeing up mothers to achieve their potential in the workplace. That may be the greatest challenge facing us as we frame family friendly policies in the future” (*Ibid.*, p. 85).

It is evident that attitudes of male workers toward work-life balance issues are not yet fully understood. While men are less likely to take up flexible options such as part time work and job sharing, our research has shown that 82% of Irish fathers of young children would like to spend more time with their families (Fine-Davis *et al.* 2004). It is thus apparent that further in-depth research on male attitudes needs to be conducted to examine the conflicts and contradictions apparent among male working fathers. We still do not understand how to facilitate men to contribute more to sharing of domestic and childcare responsibilities given their apparent wish to spend more time with their families. Secondly, we need to learn more about the attitudes of senior managers and their staff in order to understand how to facilitate greater flexibility of working patterns among male and female staff at all levels.

9.2 The Role of Men as Childcare Workers

One of the ways that men can contribute to childcare is through their participation as professionals in child care centres. This would also help to promote non-stereotyped role models in the childcare sector in order to foster the development of egalitarian gender role attitudes and behaviour in children. By seeing men in caring roles at such

an early stage children will begin to develop fundamental ideas of equality, including the notion that men can be carers. Recent pilot research in Ireland in this area has shown that having male childcare workers is perceived as positive by centre managers, parents, and most importantly, children (Fine-Davis, O'Dwyer, McCarthy, Edge, O'Sullivan, & Wynne, 2005b). The value and importance of including men as childcare workers has also been recommended by the NESF (2005) in its Forum Report on Childcare.

This is a critical piece in the overall strategy to overcome traditional gender roles and the persisting dual burden which women carry. It is only through the development of ideas of equality at an early age that male and female children will grow up with notions of sharing and equality in the workplace and the home.

However, one of the main problems the research identified is that there are not enough men coming forward to pursue childcare as a career (Fine-Davis et al, 2005b). It is clear that it will be necessary to target young men – probably in schools – to encourage them to go into childcare. Those men who are already in the profession find it very satisfying. However, it was necessary for them to overcome the stereotyped view that this was a woman's job. Research has shown that childcare workers do not perceive that their profession is highly valued. This is reflected in low salaries in the profession. All of these issues, together with the need for more training of childcare workers, need to be addressed in order to provide the quality of childcare that children deserve.

10. International Best Practice and how it might be Adapted

In most other European countries, children aged 3 – 5 (the “pre-school” group) are usually catered for in pre-school centres, écoles maternelles, etc. They are at an ideal age to respond favourably to an educational programme which is imbedded in play and are also ready for interaction with groups of similar aged children.

In Ireland, we currently have the junior and senior infant class in national schools, which cater for children aged four and five. However, at present these classes are not optimally designed to meet the needs of this age group. It has been pointed out that the class sizes and adult:child ratios in the current infant classes “compare very unfavourably with the optimum group sizes identified by research for early years settings (Hayes and O'Flaherty, 1997, p. 37)”. The average adult:child ratios in these classes are 1:25 or 1:26, whereas the optimum is 1:8 with class sizes of 15. This concern has been re-iterated by the General Secretary of the INTO, John Carr, in April, 2003. Pointing out that the average class size is 29 to one, he says that: “Every class must be smaller, with the priority given to infant classes” (*Irish Times*, 2003, p. 4). Concern about the class sizes and staff:child ratios have also been raised by the OECD (2006).

Moreover, the curriculum is not play based and is more like “school” than preschool. The teachers are primary teachers with little or no training in preschool education (OECD, 2006).

In spite of the limitations of the infant classes, which need to be addressed in any case, These existing infant classes could be seen as a beginning to be built upon and improved toward developing a national preschool infrastructure of the highest quality.

A new programme could be specially designed for the 3 – 5 year age group, involving an educational pre-school programme imbedded in play. An ideal pre-school environment in terms of child development needs, appropriate staffing, curriculum, child-staff ratios, etc. could be created for this age-group, based on the best international standards and practice. In this way, a high quality preschool curriculum could be incorporated into the mainstream educational system to benefit large numbers of children. In developing such a new approach, the experience of the Early Start programme, currently operating in schools in areas of social disadvantage should be drawn upon, as well as that of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE), the Department of Education and Science, the Office of the Minister for Children and other childcare and pre-school education experts.

The proposal of a free year of preschool education for three year olds, which has been proposed by several of the political parties in the lead up to the recent election, would tie in very nicely with this idea. We already have free preschool for four and five year olds, this would add a third year and give us a more comprehensive educational preschool programme

This re-organisation of an existing programme could significantly contribute to solving the pre-school needs of this key age group, without adding an additional tier of bureaucracy. The infrastructure is already there throughout the country. The public provision of this quality childcare available to all in local schools would augment other existing childcare facilities, thus enabling parents to have choice. It would create additional needed childcare places and provide free, accessible childcare which was of consistent high educational quality. Existing teachers could receive training in pre-school education and new teachers would receive it through the relevant educational establishments.

There are currently moves to review the curriculum at this stage of primary education in Ireland - particularly the discussion document recently published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA] 'Towards a Framework for Early Learning' (2004). This document identifies the need for a review of early educational practices for children from birth to 6 years and may form the basis for discussion and agreement on the best way to go forward nationally.

Initially, it would be possible to pilot such a programme in a few schools. The aim would be to create a model childcare facility, which would provide educational child care as well as day care. Such a model childcare facility would provide child care to synchronise with parents' working hours and after-school care. This is an area in which the City and County Childcare Committees could form linkages with the new pilot project in ways to optimise provision of childcare for working parents. A major advantage of a programme such as this is that in addition to meeting the childcare requirements of working parents, it would provide an excellent foundation course for children, especially disadvantaged children and contribute to their long term development and, in the future, their ability to participate in education and employment.

IBEC (2004) in its recent Policy Document on Education advocates "the more effective use of the national school network for the provision of pre-school, after-school and Montessori services" (*Ibid.*); it does not advocate further development of private sector childcare.

The childcare needs of parents with children aged 0-2 are also not adequately being met. As the OECD (2006) points out, “services for children under 3 have often been seen as an adjunct to labour market policies, with infants and toddlers assigned to services with weak developmental agendas . . . A challenge exists in many countries to focus more on the child, and to show greater understanding of the specific developmental tasks and learning strategies of young children” (p. 16).

In this context, there are many examples of innovative approaches to childcare in other EU countries which ideally should be researched with a view to possible replication. These include good models of integrated or ‘wraparound’ services linking community based early educational services (or childcare) to preschool services and back into afterschool services – such as the Surestart initiatives in the U.K.

The Dutch have been notably successful in designing model facilities which help parents to combine work and family life by providing one-stop centres where not just childcare but other services are available, such as after-school care (Mol, 2002). The Netherlands is also one of the few countries where part-time employment is common for men as well as women. There is much to learn from their experience in facilitating work-life balance of working parents here.

11. Conclusions and Recommendations

11.1 Conclusions

Many of the approaches which the Government has introduced in recent years to address the childcare crisis have been useful in the short term. The Government has succeeded in providing more childcare places and has created local bodies (City and County Childcare Committees) with responsibility for certain aspects of childcare co-ordination and quality. The Government has also helped to make childcare somewhat more affordable to parents and it has increased paid and unpaid maternity leave. These are positive steps. However, a longer-term comprehensive strategy is required, which more successfully addresses the issues of affordability, consistent quality and provision of accessible childcare, that synchronises with the real work schedules of working parents with children of different ages at different stages of childcare.

While much has been done, there is still a great deal of delegation of responsibility, both to childcare providers and to parents. The Government is delegating provision to a plethora of private sector, public sector and community groups, while it itself is providing capital grants. It is giving parents regularly increasing child benefit and €1,000 childcare allowances. It is basically saying to the marketplace and community: “You do it.” It is saying to parents: “You find your own childcare, you pay for it and we will help you a little bit”.

This “strategy” is basically and literally one of “passing the buck.” The Government clearly does not want to be saddled with actually *providing* childcare and seeing to it that it is of high quality, safe and providing an appropriate educational programme for

preschool age children. This is a remarkable attitude given the importance of young children to the future of our country.

It is also remarkable given that it is well known that children up to five are highly receptive to learning. Thus, it is not sufficient for educational programmes to begin at age five or six. It is essential that intervention be early, since 50% of mental development takes place in the first four years of life (Bloom, 1964, as cited in Department of Education and Science, 1999, p.12). More recent research in neurology has revealed that 90% of brain growth occurs by age three (Purves, 1994, cited in Department of Education and Science, 1999, p. 12). It has been found that the more education a person has had in his or her life, the greater the neurological development in the language areas of the brain (Robertson, 2000). While this has implications for all ages, it has particular relevance for young children, since their brain development is so concentrated in the first years of life.

In view of this, it is disappointing that the Government is willing to delegate the education of preschool children to often untrained people. That is not to say that much of the childcare out there is not good. Some of it is excellent. However, this excellent childcare usually comes at a very high cost and is not available to all equally. Because of this, a large proportion of children are cared for in less than ideal circumstances.

The analysis of childcare costs from late 2002 to early 2005 showed that the increase in the cost childcare (27.3% over two years or an average of 13.6% per annum) was almost five times higher than the rate of inflation, which ranged from about 1.8 to 3.8% in 2003-2004 (Department of Finance, 2003, 2004). This illustrates that the current Government policy of giving cash payments to pay for childcare is not economically sound, since childcare providers are raising the cost of childcare beyond the rate of inflation by a factor of approximately five. At this rate, the Government will have to continue to subsidise the child care sector at an even greater rate, as these costs escalate over time. In this regard, the OECD (2007) points out that it is important that governments make sure that childcare is affordable. This, they point out “may involve subsidising the use of childcare facilities.” They also say that “childcare subsidies seem preferable to child benefits” since the latter are ultimately lower female labour force participation (p. 132).

Both IBEC (2004) and ICTU (2006) have supported the notion of a national infrastructural changes and investment in childcare. As Begg has pointed out, care has to be approached in a “strategic and holistic fashion with the creation of a national ‘infrastructure of care’ now an urgent priority.” In policy terms, care must assume the status of a ‘public good’ similar to that enjoyed by education” (ICTU, 2006). His predictions concerning what will happen if we fail to do this are already coming to pass. Our birth rate is falling and our labour needs are already being met increasingly by migrant workers. However, it has been seen in other societies that migrants soon adapt to the fertility patterns of the host country and thus the falling birth rate will still be problem for this country unless the cost of having children is reduced through mechanisms such as public childcare facilities.

Were there a national programme of public childcare facilities, consistent high quality could be guaranteed. Given the benefits of quality early childhood education, the lack of a centralised high quality programme is a serious social policy deficit with

implications for children and their development, for working parents in meeting their childcare needs and for society in preventing later social problems

11.2 Recommendations

On the basis of these conclusions, it is recommended that:

1. A new national approach to childcare be taken, which involves the development of a national childcare infrastructure. This could be based on a re-design and extension of the existing infant classes in the national schools, currently catering for four and five year olds. The extension would involve the inclusion of three year olds, so that the three to five year preschool age group would be accommodated in this national programme.

2. The staff: child ratios would be improved to be in line with best international practice, as would the class sizes. The curriculum would be revised to be appropriate to the preschool age group.

3. Wraparound care would be developed so that the start and finishing times would synchronise with parents' working hours. This would give parents choice, so that some children would attend for fewer hours and some would be cared for for a longer part of the day.

4. After school care would also be provided in these local facilities built around national schools, with connecting ancillary services as necessary. This would involve co-ordination between the national schools and the City and County Childcare Committees.

5. Child benefit would not be increased regularly in annual budgets as a means to subsidise child care costs and the childcare allowance of €1,000 p.a. would be phased out. Instead, Exchequer funds would be re-directed to providing universal free services throughout the country for children of employed and non-employed parents.

6. Tax relief would be introduced for childcare costs, in recognition that some parents will choose to pay for childcare. This will be true of many parents with children aged 0-2, who are too young to attend the preschool programme for 3-5 year olds, as well as some who will choose to use private child care.

7. For those who are outside the tax net, a voucher system may be suitable to consider.

8. Paid maternity leave should be extended to one year to facilitate women to remain with their newborn children if they so wish.

9. Paid paternity leave should also be introduced as a statutory right.

10. Young men should be encouraged in schools through career guidance counsellors to consider child care as a profession.

11. Government resources should go to strengthen professional training of childcare workers and salaries of these workers should be increased to a level commensurate with their value to society.

12. Flexible working should be made more available, so that parents can better synchronise their working times with their childcare responsibilities.

13. Employers should make it clear that men are as eligible for flexible working patterns as women are and that their career progression will not suffer if they avail of them. It should be made clear that this includes people (men and women) in management positions as well as others.

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