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Title	Caring for the Celtic cubs: Discursive constructions of mothers and mothering in the Irish childcare debate
Authors	Leane, Máire
Publication date	2008
Original Citation	Máire Leane (2008) 'Caring for the Celtic Cubs: Discursive Constructions of Mothers and Mothering in the Irish Childcare Debate'. Arm: Journal of The Association For Research On Mothering, 10 (1):243-255.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://jarm.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jarm/article/view/16352/15211
Download date	2026-11-06 04:24:16
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/3036


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Caring for the Celtic Cubs

Discursive Constructions of Mothers and Mothering in the Irish Childcare Debate

Drawing on an understanding of the public sphere as a multiplicity of communicative and discursive spaces this paper examines the constructions of mothers, mothering and motherhood which emerged in recent debates about childcare in Ireland. Preliminary analysis of these discursive constructions suggest that they are often based on rhetoric, informed by stereotypical assumptions and rooted in frames of reference which mitigate against the emergence of alternative ways of understanding the issues of mothering and childcare. It will be argued that the reductionist and divisive nature of the childcare debate which ensued prior to the 2005 budget, stymied childcare policy development at a time when its unprecedented prominence on the political agenda and the strength of public finances could have underpinned a shift in policy approach. The paper concludes with an exploration of the ways in which feminist scholarship can challenge the Irish model of childcare policy, which continues to be premised on an understanding of childcare and the reconciliation of work and family life as the privatised responsibility of individual women.

In Ireland the Celtic "tiger economy," which has roared since the mid-1990s and precipitated the movement of increasing numbers of women with young children into the paid workforce, has resulted in childcare and indeed motherhood, becoming topics of public debate. This paper will interrogate the constructions of motherhood and mothering in the child care crisis debate which raged throughout 2005 and will explore how simplistic and reductionist conceptualizations of motherhood can result in policies which continue to privatize the burdens of motherhood and which fail to explore the potential for fathers and the wider community to assume greater responsibility for the care and nurturance of children. It will be argued that the politics of motherhood is an urgent issue for Irish feminist scholarship and that recent feminist work

on mothering and caring provides insights and strategies which can be used to challenge the privatization of childcare and to promote the redistribution of care work within both the private and public spheres.

The Irish childcare crisis: Economic, political and socio-cultural context

Over the last decade, unprecedented economic growth has seen significant increases in Irish living standards, making Ireland one of the wealthiest countries in the world today (ESRI, 2007). Reasons advanced for Ireland's success, include EU membership; Ireland's low corporation tax rate and large multinational presence; the age profile of the population with many being of working age; increased participation in the labour market especially by females and co-ordinated social partnership agreements which have quelled industrial and social unrest (ESRI, 2007). The current partnership agreement, *Towards 2016* (2006), reiterates the need for a complementary relationship between social policy and economic prosperity and emphasises the need for all people of working age to have the opportunity to participate as fully as possible in economic and social life (10, 49).[1]

The promotion of a policy of employment for all has also been advocated by business and employer organizations who identify staff shortages as a potential constraint on growth (ISME, 2005).[2] Irish mothers who work at home caring for children are constructed by employers and labour market analysts as a source of untapped labour and particular attention has been drawn to the "exceptionally large number of highly qualified females choosing to stay at home because of the lack of and cost of childcare" (ISME, 2005). The overall rate of female labour market participation in Ireland has grown significantly in the last decade increasing from just over 43.2 percent in 1996 to 58.8 percent in 2006, but a breakdown of employment figures by age and sex reveals the impact which caring for young children has on women's employment (CSO, 2006: 11). The employment rate for women in the age category 20 to 44 varied from 88.3 percent for women with no children to 53.5 percent for women whose youngest child was aged between four and five years of age (CSO, 2006: 14). In contrast, employment rates for men in the same age cohort whose youngest child was aged between four and five stood at 91.9 percent showing little difference to the rate for men with no children which stood at 94.5 percent (CSO, 2006: 14). Unsurprisingly, a recent national survey on time use confirms gendered divisions in care practices finding that on weekdays, women spend an average of just over five hours on caring and household work compared to 1 hour and 40 minutes for men (McGinnity, Russell, Williams and Blackwell, 2005: x). It would thus appear that the provision of care for children remains primarily a maternal responsibility.

Limited childcare options, high childcare costs and prevailing gender pay differentials make work force participation less economically attractive to women who have young children. Women's incomes in 2004 were 65.7 per-

cent of men's (CSO, 2006: 10) while a government commissioned report on the workplace, published in 2005, revealed that Irish parents pay on average 20 percent of their annual income toward childcare, a figure which is almost double the European Union average of 12 percent (NCCP, 2005: xii). Numerous employee surveys indicate that combining care and employment responsibilities is increasingly stressful for workers with young children and in particular for mothers, who far outnumber men in the take up of the limited options available for flexible work (NCCP, 2005; Fine-Davis, McCarthy, O'Dwyer, Edge and O'Sullivan, 2005; Drew, Humphries and Murphy, 2002). Furthermore, the culture of presenteeism and long hours and the prioritization of work over family or personal life, are identified as the norm by most employees surveyed (Fine-Davis et al., 2005).

Recognition of the need for reconciliation of work and family life combined with the buoyancy of the Irish economy and the movement of greater numbers of women with young children into the labor force, has resulted in childcare receiving unprecedented political attention in Ireland (Fine-Davis, 2004; Hodgins, Hogan and Galvin, 2007). Historically, Irish childcare policy could best be described as non-interventionist, consisting primarily of a low rate, non-means tested universal payment of Child Benefit Allowance for each child (Hodgins, Hogan and Galvin, 2007). Since 1999 however, there has been a significant increase in policy development and in funding in the childcare area. The National Child Care Strategy (Expert Working Group on Childcare, 1999) outlined a seven-year plan for the development and improvement of services, many of which have been rolled out under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) established in 2000 and funded to the tune of 440.3m (Maguire, 2006). The EOCP provides staffing and capital grants to not-for-profit community childcare groups with a view to increasing childcare places which will facilitate parental uptake of training, education and employment. By March 2006, 26,000 new childcare places had been funded and 15,000 more were in the pipeline (Maguire, 2006). Other developments since 1999 include the introduction of regulations and monitoring in the pre-school childcare sector and the certification of childcare training courses to a minimum level (Maguire, 2006; Hodgins, Hogan and Galvin, 2007). A further €575m was pledged to childcare in the 2005 budget including capital funding to support the creation of an extra 50,000 childcare places by community/voluntary providers over a five year period. Despite these developments it is estimated that given current population trends and female work participation rates there will be a shortfall of more than 40,000 childcare places by 2010 (Holmquist, 2005a). Increased paid and unpaid leave arrangements for the parents of young children were also introduced in the 2005 budget but they included no specific measures to encourage greater paternal involvement in parenting work.[3] Despite these developments the nature and extent of State policy is well characterized by Hodgins, Hogan and Galvin (2007) as "minimalist state intervention … underpinned by the

assumption that childcare is the responsibility of individual parents" (72). In this article, I draw on an understanding of the public sphere as a multiplicity of communicative and discursive spaces (Fraser, 1992) and examine the constructions of mothers, mothering and motherhood which emerged in the context of debates about childcare in one such space, namely the Irish Times newspaper.[4] Preliminary analysis of these discursive constructions suggest that they are often based on rhetoric, informed by stereotypical assumptions and rooted in frames of reference which mitigate against the emergence of alternative ways of understanding the issues of mothering and childcare.

Discursive construct one: Childcare is a women's issue

The most consistent feature of the media discourses analysed, was the focus on childcare as an issue primarily for mothers. While many commentators initially framed childcare as an issue for parents, in the development of the specifics of their arguments, it was the actions and experiences of mothers who became the focus of attention. Stereotypical constructions of childcare as a mother's issue were invoked in some discourses, which drew on essentialist understandings of the distinct roles that mothers and fathers should play in the care of children. A female contributor in a letter to the *Irish Times* entitled "Debate on Childcare Policy," claimed:

> Biologically and humanly, mothers are equipped to be the primary carers of their children.… Depriving a baby of its primary carer, the mother, at an early age is a recipe for future emotional and dysfunctional behaviour. (Barber, 2005)

The same correspondent defined the father's role in childcare as one of economic provision. While not described in such essentialist terms, very similar constructions of differentiated parental responsibilities were expressed in a series of articles written by Garrett Fitzgerald, a former Irish *Taoiseach* and a professional economist.[5] Fitzgerald (2005a) identified one aspect of the childcare issue as "the need to enable new parents—normally this will mean mothers—to stay at home for the first year with their babies." His criticism of the limited maternity leave available to Irish women was premised on a belief that children "deprived of early maternal support" would become the social problems of the future (Fitzgerald, 2005a). While Fitzgerald's recommendation that maternity benefit be extended to a full year also contained a call for "some provision for paternity leave," he depicted the male role as that of breadwinner rather than caregiver and noted that after the first year of a child's life it was important "to help mothers to exercise a free choice between home childcare and paid work" (Fitzgerald, 2005a). This framing of parental roles reflects and reinforces stereotypes of the traditional family, forecloses on possibilities for fathers to be more involved carers and presumes that all children are raised in heterosexual homes.

The question of who should take responsibility for assisting families to reconcile caring and work responsibilities was raised in many articles. Thompson (2005a) in an article entitled "Are bosses fair to working mothers?" critiqued the reluctance of employers to alter corporate culture and practices to accommodate the increasing number of employees with caring responsibilities. However, as the title of the article suggests, the issue of reconciling work and caring responsibilities was framed predominantly as a female concern and solutions to the problem were sought in changes to the public sphere of work rather than in the private sphere of gendered relations of childcare. The article chronicled three women's experiences of trying to negotiate flexible work arrangements and finished by noting that the women's real names were not used "for fear of repercussions in their working lives" (Thompson, 2005a). What the article doesn't do however, is to question why reconciling work and care responsibilities is represented only as an issue for women and indeed why discussing such issues in a public forum might have repercussions.

The issue of work/life balance was also addressed by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) who called for increased statutory action on childcare and identified a statutory right to flexible working arrangements as a key demand for future social partnership talks. ICTU claimed that 80 percent of employees were denied flexible working arrangements but in developing their argument for action on the issue, flexible work was framed as a mother's issue thus reducing its potential to be seen as a collective issue for all workers irrespective of their sex or parental status (MacCormaic, 2006).

> Employer intransigence is leading to a high female drop-out rate as many working mothers face impossible choices in trying to reconcile work and family life.… The long-term impact is to deepen gender inequality as they either leave employment or choose lower paid part-time options. (Kinnihan qtd. in MacCormaic, 2006)

The contributions made by readers to the newspaper though the letters page and in response to direct requests by commentators for reader's views on the childcare issue, provided little challenge to the prevailing discursive framing of childcare as a woman's issue. These fora were dominated by contributions from women who recounted their views and experiences of mothering, reconciling work and family life, the quality and standard of childcare and the desirability of various parenting options (Shoesmith, 2005a, 2005c; O'Neill, 2005; Thompson, 2005b; Anon, 2005; Siggins, 2005). The voices of fathers were strikingly absent from the debate. Fathers featured in the debate only in the context of commentaries on the persistence of gendered divisions of care (Pelan qtd. in "The mother of invention," 2005; O'Connor qtd. in Shoesmith, 2005b), the need for attitudinal and policy change which would make it acceptable for fathers to be more involved carers (Long, 2005; Tighe qtd. in

Shoesmith, 2005c; Richardson, 2005) and the need for men to join the struggle for improved childcare support (Hussey, 2005). Interestingly, the absence of fathers from the debate remained unquestioned.

Discursive construct two: Childcare is a working mother versus stay-at-home mother conflict

The narrow focusing of childcare as a women's issue was compounded by the construction of a simplistic, reductionist dichotomy between the ill-defined categories of working mothers and mothers in the home.[6]

> …the mothers-belong-at home lobby hijacked the campaign, praising themselves for their devotion to their children and by implication, damning women who chose to combine work and family … the focus of the debate was stolen from where it should have been—the Government's failure to provide quality, affordable childcare, and was placed squarely on mothers. (Holmquist, 2005a)

The debate is indeed littered with contributions from commentators and individual women, highlighting stringent opposition to any policy initiatives that would provide supports, financial or otherwise, to employed mothers but would have no equivalent value for mothers who worked full time in the home.

> …the diminishing band of parents who want to work full-time in the home, deeply resent any kind of tax-breaks or perks for people that will disadvantage still further single-income families.… Nothing should be done to disadvantage those who work at home. (O'Brien, 2005a)

Measures such as tax relief for childcare, the individualization of tax codes which benefit families where two parents are employed, the extension of maternity leave and the state subsidization of childcare places were all castigated as the iniquitous privileging of working mothers and the devaluing of fulltime maternal carework (Fitzgerald, 2005b; Eagan 2005; Stewart, 2005; Sudway, 2005). Judgemental assertions about the superiority of fulltime care by mothers (Stewart, 2005; Rolsma, 2005) and the selfishness of mothers who put their career and materialistic aspirations before the wellbeing of their children (Sudway, 2005) also featured in the debate. Working mothers were frequently depicted as economic dupes of the Celtic Tiger and a diminished quality of family and indeed community life was blamed on their absence from the home (O'Brien, 2005a, 2005b). In contrast, stay-at-home mothers were depicted as an ever present force for good not just for the child, but for the family, community and society at large.

The employed mother/home-based mother binary was disrupted however by the Irish Childcare Policy Network's (ICPN) reframing of childcare as a

children's issue as distinct from a women's issue and the construction of childcare provision as a statutory responsibility which would enhance the quality of life of all children, their families and their communities.[7]

> For too long Government inertia has been motivated by the fear of alienating women who choose to remain in the home full-time. But providing the highest quality childcare is not a women's issue. It is a children's issue and it is about supporting parents in their role whether or not they work outside the home. …. High-quality early years education and childcare are one and the same thing and are of benefit to all children, including the children of women who are full-time mothers. (Gibbons qtd. in Holmquist, 2005b)

Discursive construct three: feminist childcare agendas undermine parental rights and family integrity

A related strand to the construction of stay-at-home mothers as disadvantaged and undervalued, was the construction of feminism as hostile to traditional mothering.[8] Feminism is charged with having delivered women the poison chalice of the double burden of paid work and care and it is assumed that working mothers are feminists while their stay at home peers are not.

> Feminism has also played its part in degrading the role of full-time mothers and yet they [feminists] are the most vocal in bemoaning their stressed lives and "juggling" their various roles. (Barber, 2005)

A pre-budget childcare policy document was published by the National Women's Council in September, 2005.[9] It called for extended maternity leave, paid maternal and paternal leave, early childhood education for all children and a targeting of resources towards families that were economically disadvantaged, and was denounced by one commentator as a blueprint for "the final destruction of family integrity and autonomy" (Waters 2005a). Waters attributes significant agenda shaping power to what he perceives to be the extreme feminism reflected in the proposals of the National Women's Council.[10]

> …the party [government party] has taken to echoing the positions of State-feminists and other extremists with opaque agendas.… Now we find ourselves at another critical moment, when, ostensibly in fulfillment of the demands for what are called "women's rights" the de-parenting project enters its final phase. (Waters, 2005a])

Significantly however, the purported power of feminists is juxtaposed with a construction of them as representative of only a minority of women, a framing designed to draw into question the legitimacy of their contribution to the debate (Waters, 2005b).

Conclusion

The outcome of the 2005 budget in terms of childcare policy and provision suggests that the discursive power of members of civil society can indeed influence public policy outcomes. Commenting on the approach to childcare reflected in the budget the Irish Taoiseach acknowledged the "total disagreement" which existed in relation to childcare and argued that the State could not discriminate between stay-at-home parents and those in the workforce in relation to childcare measures because "it would be putting one against the other and that would be the wrong thing to do" (Ahern qtd. in O'Halloran, 2005). In effect, the reductionist and divisive nature of the childcare debate which ensued prior to the 2005 budget stymied policy making on childcare, at a time when its unprecedented prominence on the political agenda and the strength of public finances could have underpinned a shift in policy approach. Notwithstanding the additional capital funding to increase childcare spaces, the thrust of government policy remained unchanged (Reid, 2005). The universal Child Benefit payment was modestly increased and a new universal cash payment in the form of an Early Education Supplement of 1000 per child under the age of six was also provided. An extension of paid maternity leave up to 22 weeks was provided along with an extension of optional unpaid maternity leave of up to 12 weeks. No provision was made for paternal leave and no payment was provided for the existing 14 weeks unpaid parental leave available to both mothers and fathers. Furthermore, no legal requirement was made of employers to provide flexible work arrangements. In short, the policy approach to childcare continues to be premised on an understanding of childcare and work/life balance as private responsibilities of individual women. How can feminist scholarship and activism challenge such understandings?

A starting point is the questioning of portrayals of motherhood and mothering that continuously reinforce the employed mother/home-based mother dichotomy. Stephens (2004) decries the fact that much contemporary research on motherhood focuses on maternal contradiction and identity, and does so through the narrow lens of the work/home binary and the logic of contemporary capitalism, where work and consumption are key sources of meaning. She calls for research and debate, which moves beyond the work/home binary and recognizes that the public/private distinction and the notion of the autonomous, competitive, capitalist worker, do not fit easily with the actual practice of maternal care. Furthermore, Stephens argues that for a non-market version of maternal reality to emerge, methodological approaches that facilitate self-reflexive forms of both realist and fictive ethnographic writing are required. She identifies the new genre of "memoirs" of maternal experiences as a significant development, which transcends the logic of binaries and allows for the often unspeakable experiences of mothering to be expressed in a fluid narrative which, contains contradictory emotions and conflicting versions of motherhood. Contributions from women, which explore what mothering means to them, or document the detail and diversity of their mothering practices, or

consider how their mothering work could be supported in a meaningful way in Irish society, are long overdue.

Maher's (2004, 2005) recommendation of an activity-based exploration of motherhood, which theorizes mothering as work and highlights the adaptive, strategic nature of maternal practices, is also useful. Conceptualizing mothering as activity rather than identity avoids essentializing binaries and highlights the common practices of care engaged in by all mothers, and indeed some fathers, irrespective of their relationship to the labor market. Consideration of the ways in which employed mothers are continuously constructing alternative understandings of motherhood would also be fruitful in the Irish context. Research by Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson (2002) and Maher (2005), indicates that employed mothers often construct employment as an activity that enhances their well-being and in turn their child's well-being, thus challenging understandings of good mothering as requiring continuous maternal presence. A more expansive debate about of what constitutes "good mothering" is urgently required in Ireland. Feminist researchers and activists, have a role to play, in charting the processes through which women are expanding mothering repertoires and creating new, productive ways of being mothers. Documenting these activities in the public forum is vital, if public debate and public policy making are to reflect the lived realities of contemporary mothering in Ireland.

However drawing on women's experiences and understandings of motherhood is not enough. It is also important that the childcare debate should consider the wider relationship between citizenship, paid work and caregiving. In the context of the strain many women experience in combining their employee and carer responsibilities, a politics of difference, which highlights the importance of care and women's right to choose to stay at home and provide such care, may prove increasingly attractive to women. Such ideas surfaced frequently in the Irish childcare debate. However, Lister (2002) and Phillips (2000), feminists writing in the English context, caution that this difference stance, which promotes the idea of separate gendered spheres of activity, could give rise to policies which encourage women to return to or remain in the home, and thus exacerbate gender differences in relation to participation in paid and unpaid work. Lister (2002) proposes an alternative approach to the issue of reconciling paid employment with care responsibilities. She draws on Fraser's (1997) universal caregiver model, which advocates that men become more involved in combining the obligations of paid work and care, and suggests that citizenship should be conceptualized through a carer/earner model. This model would promote the value of different forms of work and encourage a more balanced mix of labor for both men and women. In practice such a model would support the subsidization of parental care of the young but would do so in a way which provided adequately paid parental leave, with stipulations for a certain quota of leave to be taken by fathers, an approach increasingly being adopted in the Scandinavian states. Related legislative developments such as stricter regulation of paid working hours and increasing obligations on em-

ployers to facilitate flexible working arrangements for employers with caring responsibilities, would supplement a carer/earner model. This type of model which puts value on both earning and caring would seem a viable response to the concerns expressed in the Irish debate about the perceived dehumanizing impact of economic growth and the devaluing of parenting in Irish society. Furthermore, perceiving care as a responsibility of all citizens challenges the view that parenting responsibilities are private, individual problems to which privatized solutions must be found. The need for this view to be articulated in communicative and discursive spheres is great and feminist scholars and activists have a key role to play in this regard.

[1]The agreement advocates that training and education should be deployed to render the workforce as highly skilled and employable as possible while also acknowledging that those with caring responsibilities should have access to appropriate supports which would enable them to meet caring and employment commitments (*Toward 2016*, 2006: 49).
[2]In a press release on Friday 19 August 2005, ISME estimated that 42,000 additional workers would be required by 2010 to prevent labor shortages becoming a constraint on growth. See <www.isme.ie>.
[3]Mothers now receive 24 weeks paid maternity leave with the option of an additional twelve weeks of unpaid leave. Each parent can also avail of 14 weeks of unpaid parental leave, to be taken before the child's eighth birthday.
[4]The media source consulted in this work is The *Irish Times* newspaper. The *Irish Times* is the only independent newspaper in Ireland and prides itself on being "the national forum for the thinkers and doers in Irish society. We offer a platform for critical, constructive and divergent comment in the different spheres of business, politics and public affairs generally." See<www.ireland.com/about/p_intro.htm. Accessed 30 October 2006. See also Horgan (2001). A search of the archive of the *Irish Times* for the period from January 2005 to April 2006 revealed approximately 350 articles that contained the word mother or motherhood.
[5]*Taoiseach* is a Gaelic word which means leader. It is the title used for the head of the Irish government.
[6]The high rate of part-time work among women with young children calls into question the ability of these categories to capture the complexity of work/care arrangements experienced by many mothers.
[7]The Irish Childcare Policy Network (ICPN) was an alliance of 20 organizations including not-for-profit childcare providers, children's rights groups, lone parent groups and the National Women's Council.
[8]Such constructions of feminism are commonplace. See, for example, Boyd (2004: 60) and Connolly (1999: 113).
[9]The National Women's Council produced a pre-budget document entitled *An Accessible Childcare Model* (2005). Gender inequality was the key concern

identified in the National Women's Council document which advocated direct state support of working parents, prioritized the importance of targeted childcare support for less advantaged parents, highlighted the need for employers to play a role in work/family reconciliation initiatives and promoted the value of Early Childhood Education for all children including those who received fulltime parental care. The National Women's Council of Ireland, a non-governmental organization (NGO) is the national representative organization for women and women's groups in Ireland.

[10]The assumption that feminism has influential power at governmental level is belied by the fact that in 2006 only 14 percent of government representatives in the Irish parliament were female. Women represented 34 percent of members of State Boards and less than ten percent of senior staff in the Civil Service. See *Women and Men in Ireland, 2006* (CSO, 2006b).

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