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# Why free childcare in Ireland should be an election issue

Updated / Friday, 24 Jan 2020 **09:39**

"Irish culture is proudly child-friendly, yet children appear to be a very low priority in the political agendas of many mainstream parties"

**Opinion: introducing free childcare could be a game-changer towards creating a more equal and fair society**

In wealthy, modern democracies people expect to be protected and looked after from cradle to the grave. But in Ireland's distinctive brand of democracy, inequality starts at the cradle, and is carried through until we reach the grave. Notwithstanding the impressive annual rate of economic growth (or perhaps because of it), Ireland today is crippled by social and economic inequalities. Middle-of-the-road economic and social policies only exacerbate the current trends of inequality, to the great benefit of a privileged, small minority at the top of the food chain. New, radical ideas are needed to tackle Ireland’s structural inequality.

Ireland is a country where many people were raised in large families and Irish culture is proudly child-friendly. Yet children appear to be a very low priority in the political agendas and manifestos of many mainstream parties. This is reflected in the embarrassing fact that Ireland is the only country in the EU that does not provide free

primary school education as many parents mist fork out hundreds of euros every year to cover the basic costs of sending their children to primary school.

Even more shocking is the cost of childcare in Ireland. The Eurydice 2019 report on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe reveals that the average monthly cost for childcare in Ireland is €771 and considerably more in Dublin. For the average family the cost of putting even only one child in a creche is prohibitively high, two or more children a financial non-starter.

23:27

***From RTÉ Radio 1's Today With Sean O'Rourke show, an Election 2020 discussion about childcare with Katherine Zappone, Independent TD for Dublin South West and Anne Rabbitte, Fianna Fail TD for Galway East***

But the issue here is not merely one of economic cost. The way childcare is structured in Ireland is one of the main causes of social inequality, and a major stumbling block towards a more equal, fair society. Childcare expenses impact some members of our society disproportionately more than other.

Two groups are particularly disadvantaged by the present policies on childcare: working-class families and women. Many working-class parents are disincentivised from seeking employment since the costs of childcare can be more than the income from a modest job. As a result, working-class families can only afford to have one income, which in turn makes it impossible for them to get on the property ladder.

But there is more. At the school gates waiting to pick up the children at the end of the (very short) school day, the mammies always outnumber the daddies, often by many

multiples. Ireland has made some major breakthroughs in gender politics in recent years, but culture is a slow-moving creature and the expectation remains that mammy does the bulk of the childcare, as well as the food shopping, cooking, and cleaning.

04:09

***From RTÉ Radio 1's Morning Ireland, what are the Government doing to address the insurance crisis in the childcare sector?***

Unlike most other countries across Europe, primary schools in Ireland do not provide subsidised after-school activities. As a result, one parent often ends up sacrificing their career for the love of the children, and for the sake of society's cultural stances. More often than not that parent is the mammy, not the daddy.

The repercussions of these enforced gender-specific career-breaks are considerable. The European Institute for Gender Equality estimates that more women in Ireland work in part-time jobs compared to men, with nearly 44% of women in full-time equivalent employment compared to 60% for men. Even when they work full-time, Irish women earn less than their male counterparts, the mean monthly earnings for women being €2,808 compared to €3,423 for men.

It also takes longer for women to be promoted, and thus women hold fewer positions of influence and power within the workplace. In Irish universities, this is reflected in the meagre number of women in senior positions, especially professors. The fact that there has never been a female Irish university president tells its own story, but the problem can be traced back to the crippling costs of childcare. Glass ceilings are a structural feature of Irish creches.

02:24

***From RTÉ One's Six One News, an ESRI study finds that high childcare costs lead to fewer working mothers***

Providing free childcare and subsidised after-school activities is not fiscal foolishness. After all, it is a reality in many European countries, especially in Scandinavia. A radical rethink of how childcare is provided would create new jobs, which would in part be funded by the taxes paid by the parents who choose to enter the workforce instead of being full-time carers for their children.

When it comes to public policy, Ireland has always followed the free-market, neo-liberal models of the UK and United States. Perhaps it's time to look further afield for a more progressive model? it is not a coincidence that Sweden, the most gender-equal society in Europe according to the European Index of Gender Equality, has one of the most extensive and affordable childcare systems.

In politics there are no simple solutions, but that's no excuse for sticking with the status quo. Dismissing *a priori* innovative, creative solutions is the quintessence of political laziness, and incompetence. When William Beveridge presented his Social Insurance and Allied Services report in 1942, it was dismissed by many as ridiculous, inexplicable, quixotic and unmanageable. Yet three years later, it formed the bedrock of the welfare state system introduced by the Labour Party in the UK.

What we need in Ireland today is another Beveridge moment. Introducing a system of free childcare is a good place to start and could be a game-changer for a political party with authentic egalitarian aspirations.

**The views expressed here are those of the author and do not represent or reflect the views of RTÉ**

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