



To Address the Child Care Crisis, Talk to Low Wage Moms

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Now that unemployment numbers have revealed that women are bearing the brunt of job losses due to the Covid-19 pandemic, discussion of America's childcare crisis has taken center stage. Data from the Pew Research Center show that mothers have lost three times more jobs than fathers – and [women accounted for all jobs lost in December 2020](#). The results can be devastating. In addition to the short-term economic damage inflicted by job losses, women who experience these employment gaps may face lifelong shortfalls in income and retirement benefits. The mental health of many mothers has also deteriorated, as relayed in dozens of recent media accounts reporting extreme levels of stress, depression and feelings of hopelessness borne by women trying to provide for their children.

The collapse of America's already fragile childcare system is at the center of this crisis. By some estimates, as many as 4.5 million childcare "slots" may be permanently lost and as many as 40% of childcare providers say they will never reopen. The nation's makeshift childcare "system" may now be getting public attention – but for millions of working mothers, conflicts between earning wages and caring for children have long been everyday experiences. If, as the pandemic ends, legislators are going to tackle the challenge of ensuring adequate, accessible child care for U.S. families, then the least well-served moms must be front and center in policy creation and implementation. The proposed child tax credit is an important temporary investment for working families, but long term, high-quality universal child care is essential for the nation.

A Persistent Crisis

Millions of low-wage working parents face extreme "choices" as they try to do jobs and care for children. The workforce called "essential" during the pandemic is dominated by working women, many of them mothers. Women are the majority of retail sales workers (77%), grocery clerks (66%), food preparers and wait staff (70%), home health and personal care workers (85%), hospitality clerks and maid service workers (66% and 88%), domestic cleaners (93%), and child care workers (93%). Women of color are significantly overrepresented in these jobs that pay between \$22,000-\$31,000 annually – about double the average cost of child care for one infant. Many of these occupations require work during evenings, nights, and weekends yet, nationally, less than 10% of providers offer childcare in such hours. Worse, workers in such posts often get little notice about scheduling and shift changes that affect their childcare arrangements.

In [hundreds of interviews conducted](#) over the last decade, we have listened to working women coping with these challenges. Moms talked about working two poverty-wage jobs, racing in between different childcare arrangements to pick up, drop off, and pack food – all while trying to reassure anxious children that things are okay. One mother, Maria, who identifies as Mexican American, told us that in 2018 she could scrape together 20 minutes to "visit" her kids between office cleaning and a Pizza Hut job. Working the 12 hours daily meant

she could almost cover her bills. Her story was just one of many among moms who bounced between work and family demands on less than five hours of sleep.

No Child Care for Moms Trying to Move Up

Other mothers described trying to escape poverty through higher education or apprenticeships. Ally, a white single mom, was overjoyed to have entered an apprenticeship program in 2020 – not knowing that there was virtually no childcare provider that would take her baby at 5:30 AM. She turned to the classified ad website Craigslist to find “someone safe” and, before COVID anxiety made insomnia a common concern, passed sleepless nights wondering if a pathway out of wage poverty could balance the risks of patchwork child care. Talia, an African American mother of one child, was going to college full time in 2016 while working retail jobs; working at least 20 hours a week is a requirement to get state childcare help while attending college. Talia’s little house of cards tumbled when her daughter’s chronic ear infections required a tonsillectomy; with no paid leave, she lost her job – and consequently her child care. In 2020, Emily, who is “Native and white” closed the home-based childcare program that she ran with her spouse after applying for “every kind of pandemic financing that there was.” None came through. Emily thinks that her history of low wages and lack of a previous “banking relationship” killed her applications. She lost her income and the parents of eight children who were doing direct care, retail, and food preparation jobs lost their child care and their jobs.

The Leaders We Need May be the Women We Leave Behind

These women have deep experiential knowledge about the crisis that millions of working parents now face. They know all about tenacity and exhaustion, about performing cheeriness in front of anxious children and later spinning into despair. They know about loyalty and helping each other as sisters, mothers, and grandmothers, as members of neighborhood, labor and faith-based networks. Importantly, they know that *if* a childcare system emerges in the wake of the pandemic, they are the moms most likely to be left out – just as they have been with other work and family policies. For example, the Center on Law and Social Policy reports that 93% of low-wage workers and 94% of part-time workers have zero access to paid leave. One in four mothers – disproportionately low-wage workers – returns to work within two weeks of childbirth. Flexibility, highly valued among parents in professional jobs, is upside down for lowest wage workers, who are often forced to work “open schedules” or at the will of the employer, with no stable schedule or income. As the possibility of accessible child care becomes increasingly real, millions of the nation’s families – disproportionately families of color and single mother families – may be left out once again.

Policymakers can make new legislation inclusive by focusing on the needs of the most vulnerable working families and their children. Low-wage moms and their advocates said that inclusive child care must be treated as a public good, like public education, and available to all as soon as they return to work. Child care must include nonstandard hours and drop-in options to help low-wage parents deal with unstable schedules. It must also be designed to address the concerns and cultural diversity of BIPOC families. The double burden carried by single mothers.

Disproportionately working in low-wage inflexible jobs was identified as a major factor to keep in mind when new programs are devised. And, importantly, childcare workers must earn living wages for their valuable work – work that holds up the entire economy as well as individual families.

Research and data for this brief are drawn from Lisa Dodson and Mary King, “Oregon’s Unmet Childcare Needs,” Family Forward Oregon, September 2019; and other published reports.