

Child Care is a Radical Feminist Issue!

Nonie Harris

International Feminist Summit, Townsville AUSTRALIA



17 - 20 July 2007 - Southbank Convention Centre

"Women of Ideas: Feminist Thinking for a New Era"

This feminist event is for all women who denounce the escalating violence and oppression that mark the 21st Century, who rage against the continued exclusion and silencing of women throughout the world, and who are convinced that a strong feminist response is essential for the creation of a fairer future.

Child Care is a Radical Feminist Issue!

Nonie Harris

In 1976 Ann Curthoys claimed, “When working class women are fighting to create non-sexist communal child care, then our feminist revolution will be on its way” (p. 5).

Child care was on the feminist agenda and was seen as central to the liberation of women.

Radical feminists linked women’s oppression to their child caring responsibilities and, also, to the ideology of motherhood that defined and contained mothering in the interests of men.

Feminists argued, “Only if the pattern of child care is completely changed can the mass of women be free” (Curthoys, 1976, p. 3).

The outcome of this radical feminist vision was support for “... a strong child care movement, as a subsidiary or offshoot of the women’s movement, with revolutionary aims, devoted to the breakdown of existing work patterns and the establishment of communal child care” (Curthoys, 1976, p. 5)

So in the 1960s and 1970s community centred child care was one of the fundamentals of the feminist revolution.

But where are we now?

In 2007 in the business section of the newspaper (what child care in the business section!) Eddy Grove’s ABC Learning Centres reported an income of \$631.5 million and a record after tax profit of \$81.1 million in 2006.

Perhaps the most telling statement about the current position of child care in Australia was made by Larry Anthony, an ex Federal Minister. When questioned by the press about his appointment as a director of ABC Learning his response was: ‘I’m delighted to be joining ABC Learning centres as a non-executive director. I think they’re a very well-run company, they’ve got good management, and it’s a good product’ (Anthony 2005, p. 1).

Much of Australian child care has become a commodity, a private enterprise where federal child care subsidies are used to fuel the record profits of child care companies. Run for profit and by men!

Child care is no longer seen as fundamental to women's liberation. And worse according to the Office of the Status of Women and a popular media commentator child care is not even a women's issue!

But women still claim child care as their own. In recent research on child care quality women declared:

Child care is a matter close to women's hearts – and needs to be talked about before all the men in power put their spin on it!

But it taps so deeply into what it means to be a mother, to care, to nurture your child. Child care is a deeply emotional and difficult thing because you are actually looking for someone to replace you... So child care is a powerful topic and until you open up that window you have no idea just how powerful it can be. It's just child care until it's about the care of your child.

Women also rejected the corporatisation of child care:

Child care should be a community service, not something to make someone else money... but of course it isn't mums who are seen to know and care about child care – it's a big bloke from down south who probably never had to juggle a three month old with an ear infection, a two and a half year old with energy to burn and a mum that just has to go to the bank!

Recently Mal Brough, the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, claimed: "The Australian Government supports families in the choices they make about appropriate child care for their children and this system (non-profit and for-profit providers) allows parents to choose which child care service meets their needs" (2006, p. 3).

Deborah Brennan describes this emphasis on consumer choice as a 'market rules' approach. Women are now seen as genderless child care consumers who can choose a child care service that best meets their individual need.

I argue that this gender neutral choice rhetoric conceals the Federal Government's push to commodify child care, their support for corporate providers and their conservative position on women as workers and as mothers.

So is it too late? I argue not!

Child care is not simply a liberal feminist issue that helps women balance work and family! Child care is still fundamental to the liberation of women and radical feminists need to reclaim child care before "all the men in power put their spin on it"!

If we do not reclaim child care, a child care movement with revolutionary aims, it will remain in the hands of men whose sole goal is not the liberation of women or quality care for our children but the unfettered pursuit of escalating profit at the expense of women.