

Written submission to the Senate Inquiry into Childcare

One aspect of juggling motherhood and paid work that I did not bargain on was my overwhelming compulsion to enter the public debate on parenting, child care and work. It is official - I have become a working mum obsessed with defending a mother's choice to prioritise mothering over working.

For the past year I have had the same 8 items of delicates in the bottom of my wash-basket. I now find myself at a point where I have mastered the crazy performance of being a mum to 2 children (aged 2 1/2 and 1) a wife to a man that works at least 60 hours each week and a part-time professional (working 30 hours per week) just enough that I can probably manage to get this overdue washing done (and many other overdue domestic chores tackled too) but instead (and I am sure it is not because I am trying to avoid that last bit of washing) I feel compelled to write submissions like this to add to the debate in the hope that it will make the pendulum swing away from the work bias and toward mothering.

This is not the first time.

In May when the Federal Government decided it was going to drop baby bonus payments and family tax benefit part B payments for high income earners I abandoned even the critical washing that night and wrote to my local MP, various ministers, the treasurer, the shadow treasurer and the Prime Minister voicing my concerns. I was angry. Effectively abandoning these payments was yet another strategy by our policy makers to separate mothers and babies and to favour women who prioritise their re-entry into paid work over their care for their babies. The responses I received from the Federal Government were predictably all about the government doing the best it can for "working families" but also having to make some tough choices in the process in order to tackle inflation (which in May last year was the big economic worry) one of which was to stop payments to "wealthy" families (defined to be those earning \$150,000 p.a or more).

I was not satisfied with the responses I received. I did not see our family as being "wealthy". My husband works between 60-80 hours per week, we have 2 children (2 and under), 40% of my husband's salary goes toward a mortgage for a modest 4 x 2 home in a modest suburb of Perth. But, more fundamentally, I was offended by the underlying policy which clearly did not value my contribution as a full-time mother to my very young children and did not recognize that my husband's income was supporting a total of 4.

Then, in August, I re-entered the paid work-force. I sought and found part-time work (I am a lawyer). On re-entry into paid work and entry for the first time into the industry of paid child-care I found myself even more obsessed with the issues.

I am one of the many mothers of young children unwilling to place her children into long day-care. Instead I chose to use a private nanny – something that only those on professional salaries can choose as the costs are prohibitive for anyone earning average wages. I wanted to be able to meet and have a relationship with the actual person caring for my children. I wanted the care would be in our house and for my children (only 18 months apart) to not be separated from each other (in long day-care they would have been in separate zones toddler vs baby). I did not want my children to be "little commuters" getting up at 6 to be dropped off by 7.30 and then waiting to be collected by 6 that evening. Plus, I did not want their transition to outside care to be too traumatic along with my transition back to work. So, I advertised on www.findababysitter.com.au and was astounded by the response. Within 5 days I had 45 responses, mainly from qualified ex-childcare workers who had dropped out of the formal childcare system in preference for private work which gave them more job satisfaction and better reward (financial and personal).

The choice to use a nanny is expensive. It takes up 75% of my take-home pay, so it is hardly economical. But, for me, I would not have returned to work if the only option was long day-care.

My choice to use a nanny receives absolutely no government support. I am not eligible for any childcare rebate or childcare benefit. I pay full taxes on my income and the nanny pays full taxes again on what I pay her. As each day goes by, I am not sure that I made the right choice in returning to work. But, I am sure that the childcare choice I made is the right one for us. I would love to work less or work more flexibly to be there more for my babies, especially during their pre-school years. On the other hand, I needed to get a work identity back again and to make sure my professional skills did not lag to a point of no return. I have been lucky to find an employer that is committed to providing flexible working arrangements for its staff.

In November I attended a public forum on the Draft Early Learning Framework paper – carried out by DEEWR. The forum was predominantly attended by child care workers, academics and government officials. Bizarrely, I found myself standing before the packed forum pleading the case – very emotionally - for mothering over working – for the positive contribution made by caring stay at home mums to the development and well-being of babies and toddlers to be recognized at government level. Did you know that not once in the Framework Paper is at-home child-care seen as an option for advancing the well-being of our children? Yet, it is the overwhelmingly most common model for care that Australian families choose for small children.

Next, in December, I wrote and sent in written submissions to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into paid parental leave and to the DEEWR draft Early Years Learning Framework. This submission is attached.

Finally, still not complete for the year I found myself standing during a lunchtime seminar at work on work/life balance and trying to call the girls at work to rise and "make a difference", "to get active" for the sake of our babies and our work by fighting for meaningful parental care leave, flexible working, child-care arrangements, family tax policies that operate together to allow families (but especially women) to combine parenting and working in a way that works for them and their children. Suffice to say, this was a sure sign a needed a holiday.

Now a new year arrives, and my compulsion to say my bit has not faded. Here I am writing to the Senate on its inquiry into the provision of child care and it looks like those delicacies at the bottom of the washing basket will be waiting another year!

As the Senate considers alternative options and models for the provision of child care, the Senate should be mindful that women do not all want the same thing. We do not all want to work full-time and have our children cared for in long day-care centres, especially our small children. The Senate should also be mindful of what our children need. Babies, need one to one attention, this is unlikely to happen in a day-care situation where the ratio is one caregiver for four or in some States five babies.

Under the current system long day care is favoured over all other forms of care. Programs, policies, tax relief and payments should be expanded to embrace the full diversity and difference that exists in parenting and working patterns chosen by Australian women and families. This includes stay-at-home parenting, informal at-home care such as private nannies or relatives, flexible working arrangements and part-time and casual working.

The approach needs to be holistic. It is pointless to only talk of child care reform or to only talk of parental leave reform or to only talk of family tax reform. All areas of reform need to be discussed together with the clear aim of providing a situation where women and families can freely choose a care model that suits their needs and above all meets the needs of children. If a woman decides that it is better for her to stay at home to care for her children her work as a caregiver should be valued. For example, tax relief could be offered to her partner's income to take into account the fact that his income is a family income? If she is a single parent, home care allowances should continue to be provided. Where a woman chooses a private nanny rather than day-care she should not be cut out of child care subsidies and allowances.

Now inflation is not the spectre it once was, and unemployment looks to be rising so the imperative to get Mums out there working is probably not so great – the time is ripe to shine the light into the shadow economy of care and give it a meaningful value.

Finally, before the Senate concludes on any of its reference points, I suggest that the Senate reads Anne Manne's Quarterly Essay: Love & Money – The Family and the Free Market.

Regards,

Sally Rogers