

**2004 Annual Conference**  
**Crises of Care Across the Lifespan: Women, Taxes,  
and Care Work in the Public and Private Sectors**

Discussion Leaders:

**Susan Bailey**, Executive Director, The Wellesley Centers for Women, Wellesley College

**Leslie Calman**, Executive Vice President, Legal Momentum

**Anna Wadia**, Director of Program, Economic Security, Ms. Foundation

*"We can have a discussion about why the women's movement has backburnered this issue, although it was one of the issues of the very early women's movement, but for a whole range of reasons, it hasn't been an issue – until recently – on the front burner. We're trying to make it an issue again."*

-Audience member (anonymous)

*"I'm sure this group understands that providing quality care for children would remove one of the great barriers to women's equality."*

-Leslie Calman

*"It is not a choice of whether to pay, but how to pay."*

-Anna Wadia

## **Overview**

Tax cuts, combined with the current federal budget allocation, siphon much-needed funds away from programs that ensure quality care for children, the elderly, and the disabled. Women are without a doubt the hardest hit by these cuts and allocations because they most frequently provide the care, whether at home for a family member or at a center for a wage. Too often women choose to leave the workforce due to the pressure to care for children or an ill or elderly family member, because the cost of care is simply too high.

Participants in this session discussed the causes of the current crisis and potential solutions to create a care economy that the government supports.

**Anna Wadia** discussed the "caring pyramid." This pyramid is composed of the three different parties involved in care giving:

- 1) The cared-for:
  - Children
  - Elderly
    - Women make up the majority of the elderly, because they live longer.
  - Disabled
- 2) Families whose members need care:
  - Those who give unpaid care in these families are predominately women.
  - When care is paid for, women are primarily the decision makers about the care and have to forgo their own work when the care falls through.
- 3) Workers in the formal economy who care for a wage.
  - These workers are predominately women, and a high proportion of them are women of color.

The way the system works now, without an adequate subsidy from the government, the interests of the three corners of the pyramid conflict. Families cannot afford the quality, reliable care that they need, and care workers receive poor pay and insufficient benefits, which leads to high

turnover. The cumulative effect is poor quality of care for those who need it, and a serious shortage of workers for the elderly and disabled. If there were adequate resources, however, the interests of the three corners could align:

- 1) Care giving would become a decently waged profession with benefits and career ladders.
- 2) Women and men wanting and needing to work outside the home could hold down jobs and improve their families' economic security while knowing that their dependents are being well cared for.
- 3) At-risk children would receive the care that they need to improve their outcomes and future work lives.
- 4) The elderly and disabled would receive compassionate, safe, consumer-centered care.

Wadia identified three components necessary to make the system work for all:

- 1) The government must adequately subsidize the cost of care so that families can afford it, and so that workers can make a self-sufficiency wage with benefits.
- 2) The government should fund training for care workers.
- 3) Clear regulations and professional standards should be provided in order to create career ladders that reward good training with better pay.

The current system, without government subsidies, costs the government, businesses, and society as a whole too much, for a variety of reasons:

- 1) Employers bear the cost of an unstable work force, one that is worried about the care given to their dependents.
- 2) Families already struggling to make ends meet have to face the even larger burden of paying a high cost for poor quality care.
- 3) Care workers are paid so little that the government subsidizes them with food stamps and other government benefits.
- 4) Nursing home care costs the state many times more than home-based care.
  - Low pay and poor job quality are leading to major shortages of home care workers.

There are two basic ways to pay for care. The first results in a lack of economic security and poor care for those involved. The second is a move that leads to better outcomes and improves the lives of families, workers and dependents. There are many ways to move from where we are to the vision of a care system that works:

- 1) Union organizing, particularly through coalitions of labor, senior citizens and disability activists working together to demand collective bargaining agreements with cities.
- 2) A "worthy wage" campaign, in which parents join with childcare workers to demand better pay and advancement opportunities for the workers.

- 3) Creation of jobs and businesses.
  - For example, in the Bronx, NY, the Cooperative Home Care Associates program is part of a family of cooperatives that is able to create jobs with better pay and benefits because the workers are owners. These cooperatives work hard to influence the policies of the states in which they are active, creating a systemic impact.

**Leslie Calman** next addressed her concerns about the current childcare situation and described the one-year old Family Initiative for Better Childcare – Preschool and Afterschool, at Legal Momentum. Through this project, Legal Momentum attempts to ensure that quality care and early education are available to every family that wants them.

Calman noted that the media often tries to divide women by making a distinction between the interests of working mothers and stay-at-home-moms, a faulty distinction, because most mothers do both: stay-at-home mothers of small children plan to (and usually do) return to the work force, and those mothers in the work force are still parents. Calman cited a Pew Foundation report that explained that, particularly around pre-Kindergarten, many of these “differences” among mothers are likely to disappear, because the children of stay-at-home mothers are almost as likely to be in pre-K programs as are the children of working mothers.

Calman next addressed the difficulty of bringing the issue of childcare to public attention. For women in the United States, as opposed to Europe, asking that the care of children be an issue of public concern is still taboo. Calman identified four audiences that need to be addressed and discussed the different messaging that gets their attention:

- 1) Educators
  - There is consensus among educators that quality care and education is crucial to children’s cognitive and social development.
  - Educators often want to talk about “school readiness:” childcare that readies children for school and, eventually, the work force.
- 2) Corporations
  - Corporations are typically quite responsive to the same readiness argument.
  - Corporations are also receptive to an argument about international competitiveness.
  - The more “enlightened” in corporations also respond to an argument about how flexibility and family friendly policies are good to employees and the “bottom line.”
- 3) Public officials
  - Public officials are receptive to an argument about the long-term benefits of good childcare, in which subsidies are investments rather than handouts.
  - Public officials also responsive to the point that childcare is a business and, like any business, childcare can create jobs not only for care workers but also for the construction workers who build the centers, etc.
- 4) Mothers
  - Legal Momentum ran focus groups of lower- to middle-income working mothers to learn what kind of language resonates with them. The issue of “who is responsible for caring for my kids” is a fraught issue.
  - When asked, “Do you think that the government has some responsibility to care for your children?” participants responded very negatively.
    - “When I decided to have children, I knew they were *my* responsibility.”
    - Moms take great pride in seeing themselves as responsible, hard working parents.

- When asked, “You’re a responsible parent. As a responsible parent, you need to put food on the table, pay the rent, *and* take care of your kid. Could you use some help?” participants responded more positively.
  - “Why isn’t the government helping?”
  - Participants seemed to move to anger that the government isn’t speaking to this issue and that the political leaders are not speaking to it.
- Other results:
  - Mothers are responsive to positive messages about what’s good for their kids – what’s good for their safety, well-being and happiness.
  - Mothers do not want to hear messages that suggest that they have a need.
    - Such messages suggest that children won’t be well cared for otherwise, and that the family *needs* something, rather than childcare being something that they want.
  - Mothers do not like thinking of childcare as an economic issue.
    - They rejected the economic competitiveness message, but did wonder why they’re doing it better in Europe.
  - Mothers are insistent on choice.
    - Particularly with the youngest children, mothers are resistant to a “one size fits all” approach.
    - Some preference for home-based care, some preference for center based care – reactions were strong on both sides.
- When asked about the role of the government:
  - Mothers agree that childcare workers and providers are underpaid and understand that this results in poor care and high turnover of staff.
  - Mothers were generally supportive of government actions to change this, including:
    - Increased government resources to make childcare more available.
    - Increased tax credits – either child tax credits or childcare tax credits.
    - Public investment in centers and teachers, resulting in lowered costs for *all* parents. (Mothers don’t want to feel personally subsidized.)

**Susan Bailey** discussed the Wellesley Centers for Women’s School-Aged Childcare Project. When the program began 27 years ago, concern about the care of school age children was still considered an individual ordeal. The project made headway, progressing toward the ideal of childcare as a public responsibility. Bailey reiterated the fact that, particularly in the case of elder care, women – the poorest, most disadvantaged women – are the ones most frequently doing the care work. Those working in family-based care centers have the least training and education and are often the ones most in need of some kind of government support. Family-based care centers need professional development support.

Participants discussed ways to mobilize the public around the issue of childcare, which far too often seems to fall beneath the radar in the political realm:

- 1) Action, organizing kits, and the continuation of focus groups are needed.

- 2) A woman from **Rutgers** explained that they had performed a study for the Sloane Foundation, looking at women in management positions in financial services, IT, and pharmaceuticals. When asking questions related to the relationships of both women and men to their communities and the barriers that might have hindered their advancement, those performing the study were surprised to find that a mass of mid-level women blamed their lack of advancement on the lack of childcare. Ironically, among this mass, a majority seemed to believe that their problems were individual matters that were up to them to solve alone. The speaker maintained the importance of these mid-level women as potentially mobilizable, because they do have clout, if only they choose to use it.
- 3) Men need to get involved in this action plan. Ideas included studies in which men are asked if they had the opportunity to get to know their own fathers. Young men must see the benefits of equal-opportunity parenting.
- 4) The framing of the debate is important. The way it is currently framed – care subsidies parallel welfare subsidies and are therefore bad – needs to be changed. Several participants suggested attacking privatization for being ineffective: even if we had all the money in the world, we still would not have an effective childcare system, because we would not pass standards. Childcare is not a system that can remain in the private sector and effectively serve children.
- 5) **Nancy Folbre**, when asked what strategies she thought are most appropriate in addressing this situation, noted that the constituencies of slightly different activist groups needed to be bridged. Groups working on health care and those working on childcare need to get together. Alliances between consumers and workers are important, too; e.g. people listen to doctors have to say. If doctors said that we need to change the health care system, then people would listen.