Who cares?: ‘Working mothers’, childminders and childcare

Childcare is central to women’s ability to participate in paid work. Drawing on empirical research conducted with middle class ‘working mothers’ in an Irish suburb, this article examines these women’s childcare arrangements and their relationships with the women who mind their children in the context of the State’s childcare policy and provisions. The failure of the State to regulate small scale childminders maintains childcare as a predominantly private affair, which can result in childcare being precarious for childminders, ‘working mothers’ and children.

Childcare policy and provision

In 1973, the Irish Government removed the ‘marriage bar’ (Government of Ireland 1973), as a pre-condition to Ireland’s membership of the EEC and since then women’s participation in the Irish labour force has increased dramatically. In the thirty years between 1971 and 2001, the number of women in paid employment rose by 140 per cent and, in 2008, sixty-one per cent of women aged between 15 and 65 were employed, which was above the EU average of fifty-nine per cent (CSO 2009a). In 2009, the employment rate for women aged 20-44 was sixty-four per cent (CSO 2010).

While there is no universal and generalisable female experience of the workforce, motherhood clearly has a negative effect on women’s employment. This is evident in the participation rates of childless women relative to mothers, with eighty-seven per cent of women without children in employment compared
to fifty-five per cent of women whose youngest child is aged 0-3 years, fifty-four per cent of women whose youngest child is aged 4 – 5 years and sixty-four per cent of women whose youngest child is aged 6 or over (CSO 2009b).

Fatherhood does not have the same effect on male employment, eighty-four per cent of childless men are employed, eighty-two per cent of fathers whose youngest child is aged 0-3 years, eighty-five per cent of fathers whose youngest child is aged 4 – 5 years and eighty-one per cent of fathers whose youngest child is aged 6 or over (CSO 2009a). This is not unique to Ireland, but the impact of having children is greater in Ireland than in almost any OECD country (NWCI 2009).

In an EU study Ireland ranked lowest in terms of child care supports and maternity leave and was ranked the worst of the original fifteen member states in terms of public child care provision (EC 2004). In 2000 as part of the National Development Plan 2000-2006 the government introduced The Equal Opportunities Child Care Programme (EOCP) (Government of Ireland 2000) to increase the supply and quality of childcare throughout Ireland. The EOCP provides funding for private, community and voluntary childcare sectors. Private childcare and self-employed providers receive funding to establish and staff childcare centres. Grant assistance is given to community based child care facilities through thirty-three County and City Childcare Committees and the EOCP also recognises the role of the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCOs) in the development of quality childcare and allocates funding to this sector to develop and support childcare programmes.
Small-scale childminders are specifically excluded from the notification process required under the Child Care Act 1991 (Government of Ireland 1991). However, the Childcare Regulations (Government of Ireland 2006a) make provision for the voluntary notification by childminders of their childcare service to the Health Services Executive (HSE). Childminding Ireland provides training and support to small scale childminders who register their services. In addition the EOCP launched the Childminding Initiative which makes funding available to the County Childcare Committees to facilitate training, networking and information activities to create awareness of quality among small scale childminders.

In 2006, Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education was published to provide quality standards in pre-school childcare and applies to private, self-employed and community facilities as well as registered private childminders. However, discourses of children’s rights and early childhood education have also informed policy and since 2010, the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (Government of Ireland 2009a) has provided limited free pre-school places in pre-school services who provide an appropriate educational programme which adheres to the principles of Síolta. Children aged between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months enrolled in pre-schools receive free pre-school education of three hours per day, five days each week for thirty-eight weeks.

At the level of the individual, the Government provides Child Benefit which can be used towards childcare costs, even though it is available regardless of the economic or employment status of the mother. In Budget 2006, (Government of Ireland 2006b) an Early Childcare Supplement was introduced,
which was a grant of €1,000 per year for each child up to and including age 5. This grant was available to all children in the state regardless of the employment status of the mother, but it was designed to assist with childcare costs for employed mothers. Also in Budget 2006, a new Childminding Relief was introduced, whereby a Childminder who minds up to three children in their own home can earn €10,000 tax free, provided their total income from childminding does not exceed 15,000 in a year. The tax free income was increased from €10,000 to €15,000 in subsequent budgets, however the limit to overall earnings remains the same at €15,000. However, the Early Childcare Supplement was removed in 2009 (Government of Ireland 2009b) which suggests that in times of rising unemployment, there is no further need to facilitate women’s or mothers’ employment.

Collins and Wickham (2001) and Mahon (2004) suggest that the government’s position encourages the increasing marketisation of childcare on the American model, whereby parents with good financial resources will buy childcare on the formal market and selected ‘excluded’ communities will be the recipients of government largesse for subsidized childcare. ‘The Government is delegating provision to a plethora of private sector, public sector and community groups, while it itself is providing capital grants. It is basically saying to the marketplace and community: “You do it.” It is saying to parents: “You find your own childcare, you pay for it”’ (Fine Davis 2007:21).

The lack of state support and childcare provision in Ireland (Murphy-Lawless 2000; Kennedy 2001) has created a situation whereby childcare has been positioned as a private issue for families to resolve themselves. This is
what the OECD (1990) has termed a ‘maximum private responsibility’ model of childcare, ‘in which the joint problems of childcare, family life and labour force participation are entirely private concerns which are left to the individual to solve’ (Coveney, Murphy-Lawless and Sheridan 1998:11). In practice, ‘the individual referred to here is usually the mother’ (O’Sullivan 2007:279).

Research participants
Applying a feminist, intersectional research methodology, a case study was conducted in a middle class Irish suburb which examined the intersecting inequalities and privileges experienced by women who combine motherhood with paid work. Research participants were identified as women with children who engage in paid work of any kind and recruited through four primary schools in the area of the local study.

In Ireland, the 11 category Socio Economic Grouping (SEG) classification system brings together people with broadly similar economic and social status and people are assigned to a particular SEG on the basis of their occupational and employment status (CSO 1996). The 7 category Social Class Groups classification aims to bring together persons with similar social and economic statuses on the basis of the level of skill or educational attainment required. In determining social class, occupations are ranked by the level of skill required on a social class scale ranging from one highest to seven lowest. All participants in the study are ranked in the top five socio-economic groupings [A-E] and the top five social class groups [1-5]. This study was conducted in a
middle class suburb of a provincial city, and in the 2006 Census (CSO 2006),
data on the provincial city reveals that twelve per cent of females are classified
as SEG A employers and managers, compared to twenty-three per cent of
participants; similarly five per cent of females in the city are classified as SEG
B higher professionals compared to seventeen per cent in the study, seven per
cent of females in the city are classified as SEG C lower professionals,
compared to thirty per cent of participants and thirteen per cent of females in the
city are classified as SEG D non-manual compared to twenty-seven per cent of
participants. Only in SEG E manual skilled workers, were participants in the
study lower, being three per cent in the local study, compared with ten per cent
in the city. Their occupations suggest the middle class profile of participants as
well as the middle-class nature of the local suburb, relative to the city of which
the suburb is a part.

Women in this study engaged in paid work and, of the sample, seven per
cent job shared, forty per cent worked part-time, ten per cent worked reduced
hours, while forty-three per cent of women worked full time. Their hours at
work ranged from twelve to forty-five hours per week. All women combined
motherhood with paid work. Family sizes ranged from one to five children. Ten
per cent of women had one child, forty-seven per cent had two children, thirty-
three per cent had three children, seven per cent had four children, while three
per cent had five children.

Clearly the greater number of children, the more complex childminding
arrangements become. Of these women, fifty-four per cent engaged private
childminders only, thirteen per cent combined childminders with family care, twenty per cent had family-only care arrangements, seven per cent combined crèche care with other arrangements, three per cent combined family with after school care and three per cent had no childminding arrangements.

Childminding preferences

Women spend considerable effort on making childcare choices, because certain forms of caring, namely ‘love labour’ (Lynch, 1989), cannot be provided on a hire and fire basis (Lynch 2007). All ‘love labour’ (Lynch 1989, 2007) involves caring, but not all caring involves love labour and it is possible to care for children without feeling emotionally attached to them. Lynch (1989, 2007) developed the term ‘love labour’ to describe all the work that is involved in caring. ‘Love labour’ involves emotional and other work orientated towards the enrichment and enablement of others. It involves both emotional work which includes thinking, and planning for others, attentiveness, listening, managing relations and conflict, as well as material tasks which involve cleaning, cooking, washing, lifting, and attending. The ‘love labour’ women do in caring for their children is often experienced both as a burden and a pleasure. It has also been argued that these unique and particular emotional aspects of caring work mean it is impossible to commodify them in any usually economically understood sense of the term ((Lynch and McLaughlin 1995; Nussbaum 2000; Crompton 2006; Lynch 2008; Lynch and Baker 2008).
Women’s desire to have their children cared for and loved by their carers led to many women claiming to have preferred family care to engaging a paid childminder or crèche to care for their children. However, only twenty per cent managed to achieve this at any stage. However, the care of female relatives reinforces the gendered order of caring. Thirteen per cent of women combined family care with paid care, Jean has her older child minded by her own mother, while her younger two go to a childminder’s home. Similarly Yolanda’s parents come to her home two days, and her children go to the childminder for the other days. Sixteen per cent of husbands are actively involved in the care of their own children, which may suggest men are challenging and valuing care. This is consistent with the national data, in 2008, men spent on average four hours and forty minutes per day on paid work and just under two hours per day on caring and housework (McGinnity and Russell 2008). Joy only works when her husband is home in the evenings and weekends to care for their children. Faye’s husband has reduced his hours of work and minds their children one day every week. Family caring, while making caring a private issue, also means that the caring is not commoditised, and fits with traditional expectations of caring as outside the remit of the market.

Women who engaged childminders experienced criticism from those women who only availed of family care. Joy believed only family care was good enough for her children, and claimed women who went outside family for childcare were neglecting their children, by ‘dumping’ them. ‘So and so’s dumping their children to be reared by other women’ (Joy Focus Group). This
was quite a strong statement to make in a focus group discussion where women had discussed their distress regarding sourcing childminders, children’s unhappiness with childminders and women reluctantly reducing their hours of work because of their failure to make satisfactory childcare arrangements.

Choosing childcare is one of the most difficult and important decisions a ‘working mother’ has to make in relation to combining motherhood with paid work. Women were concerned that the people they engaged to care for their children would care for their children to the same extent as they themselves, did. However, sourcing carers who will care for children to the level women desire is difficult, because registered childcare is primarily available in the form of crèche care. There is an unfounded assumption that crèche care is impersonal and formal with children not receiving the individual attention or comfort they would in a home environment. There was widespread condemnation of crèche care by women who used childminders or family members.

And this business of children being in crèches from eight o’clock in the morning, till eight o’clock at night, five days a week, and (.) I don’t think that’s right. You know. I mean a child didn’t ask to be brought into the world, and it most certainly didn’t ask to be dumped into a crèche for forty-something hours a week (Grace Interview).
Grace engaged a childminder, and even though she was not entirely satisfied with her own childminding arrangements, she nevertheless felt they were superior to women who engaged crèche care. There is an interesting paradox surrounding crèche care. Popular views regularly link ‘dumped’ with crèche, and crèche care is commonly seen as inferior to maternal care. ‘It goes against the whole thing about having a child if they’re going to be sitting in a crèche from nine to six all day long’ (Gina Interview). Yet, the government regards provision of childcare places through capital grants for crèche providers and crèche places for disadvantaged children as all that is necessary to facilitate women’s employment. However, most participants expressed a preference for more personal forms of care and sought individual childminders who would develop long term relationships with their children. Fine Davis (2007) also found the majority of pre-school children of working parents are cared for by a paid carer, which is generally a childminder and that less than one in four children were cared for in crèches or childcare centres. She suggests that either there are not enough childcare facilities available or their cost is too high. In this research, however, women gave personal preference as the reason for selecting private childminders rather than crèche care.

An estimated 75,000 children are placed with 37,900 childminders every working day, making it the most popular form of childcare in the State (OECD 2002). However, there is little regulation of this service. Only 229 of these childminders are registered with the Health Services Executive (HSE), as childminders who care for fewer than four children in their own home are not subject to any regulation, mandatory training or Garda clearance as registration
with the HSE is voluntary. ‘Childminding has been a hidden part of the economy for a very long time, so we’re not surprised at the numbers . . . it also suits society to have it this way, to have cheap, accessible childcare available’ (Childminding Ireland 2009). There is an implication by Childminding Ireland that because childminders are not registered, they are providing an inexpensive service, there is also an implication that childcare is accessible. It is not. Barry (2008) claims there is a growing crisis in care provision, linked to both lack of availability and high cost in the context of low-level public provision of childcare services. Because so many childminders are not registered, the invisibility of childminders, both in the formal economy and in society, makes it difficult for ‘working mothers’ to make and retain satisfactory childcare arrangements. ‘Looking for a child-minder is difficult, and obviously finding the right child-minder is difficult and keeping the same child-minder is also difficult. Obviously there is a cost issue as well. It’s much higher with two children’ (Collette Focus Group). In this research all women spoke of the cost of childcare as their financial responsibility. This is consistent with the findings of Mahon (1998) and Hattery (2001) who also found that childcare is a woman’s expense, not a family’s expense. In fact, Mahon (1998) found the gendered responsibility of paying for childcare is a disincentive to women’s participation in paid work. Lewis (2002) found that modifications to the male breadwinner model, through mothers’ employment and notions of gender equality, do not necessarily lead to changes in gendered identities about caring and all participants in this research acknowledged gendered obligations to care.
I had to find a childminder. I remember I came back here and there was no sort of [available register]. And I wasn’t from [the local area] … and it was the most stressful two years of my life, almost to the stage where I would, very, I almost gave up work, and it was a real struggle (Amy Focus Group).

In Amy’s account, the lack of state provision of childcare had a direct negative impact on her participation in paid work. Amy described being very committed to her career in London and holds the lack of quality childcare directly responsible for her decision to reduce her hours in paid work. However, as Collins and Wickham (2001) note, the issue of childcare has not actually prevented women from entering the workforce. ‘Irish women, and in particular Irish mothers, are entering the workforce in increasing numbers, without the help of formal childcare’ (Collins and Wickham 2001:11). In this study, arranging childcare is the responsibility of individual women, who source, arrange and pay for childcare and have full responsibility for its success or failure. The Women’s Health Council (2004) argue this inequitable burden has been found to cause women significant physical and emotional distress.

**Relationships with childminders**

As the care sector has grown, women have formed an ever larger majority of paid care workers (Daly and Rake 2003). In keeping with the low value
assigned to caregiving in the private sphere, this sector is characterized by low pay and poor working conditions, devaluing the value of care in economic and employment terms (Womens Health Council 2004). Certain tasks are commodifiable though, and there is a case for substantially improving the conditions of its commodification to preclude exploitation (Meagher 2002). There is, of course, an individual responsibility for employers of carers to act ethically (Kittay 1999; Tronto 2002) and many women do. ‘I pay her well and I look after her well, so it definitely works both ways’ (Amelia Interview).

The quality of childcare is a major concern for parents and satisfaction with the arrangement in respect of the emotional well-being of the child has been found to be at least as important as economic considerations (Wheelock and Jones 2002). Avril feels even the terms ‘childcare’ and ‘childminding’ do not do justice to the relationship involved. ‘Thinking of it as childminding, I think, is (.). I never think of it like that, I think of it as what’s benefiting for the child… I think that even no matter if it’s five hours or ten hours, it has to be a very secure environment. And that has to be right for the child’ (Avril Focus Group). Faye also appreciates the difference her childminder makes to the quality of her life and claims ‘this woman, is just like, probably one of the most important parts of our lives, bar the immediate family’ (Faye Focus Group). In a focus group discussion, Grace recounted a conversation with her childminder

Grace My intention was to try and get her to stay with us and to do the reduced hours, and… what she said to me was
‘What are you going to do if I don’t do it?’ So I said
‘Well, you know, we really haven’t thought that far
ahead, but if you don’t, well, I’ll try and get somebody
else’, and she said ‘Oh I’d hate to think of Katie dumped
in with someone else’ …‘Dumped’ Not a word about
Susan, of course. I could have sold her to the gypsies.

Faye Doesn’t that make you think what she thinks you’re doing
with your children is dumping them?

Grace But this is it. That’s what I was saying. So, it’s at the
back of your mind you see.

The way care is regarded as women’s work, and its low valuation was evident in
the way Grace’s childminder regarded her own work. It was interesting that the
childminder used the term ‘dumped’ in relation to a child to whom she is clearly
attached. Obviously the childminder does think children are dumped by their
mothers. Grace is aware of this and bringing her children every day to this
woman causes Grace distress. It is also clear that while Grace is ‘dumping’ her
children, they are ‘dumped’ on the childminder, who has little value on the work
she herself does. However, power relations are also evident in the relationship.
Grace can arbitrarily reduce her hours of work without negotiation or notice,
while the childminder can withdraw the service altogether.
So I think maybe she had it too easy, really to be honest, for years… I think she kind of got a bit of a wake up call, and she realised, free money here for doing very little. So that has improved quite a bit, and the fact that they see less of her is a good thing I think now as well… the balance has come back into it, and I suppose the other advantage for me is that I’m very definitely now their mother, do you know what I mean? and she is in her role (Grace Interview).

There is a delicate dynamic in the relationship between ‘working mother’ and childminder and it can be hierarchical and emotionally competitive in some cases. Women feel usurped when their children become too attached to childminders and women do not want their positions as mothers undermined. By reducing the time her children spend with the childminder, Grace is ‘very definitely now their mother’ and ‘she is in her role’ suggests that the childminder role is one of employee.

At the end of the day they are your kids, they’re not her kids, you know what I mean? And like, this is a job and her kids come first, if it was any other way, it would be wrong from her point of view. But of course, you see, you want it all… You want her to cosset your kids the way you [do] and of course, she’s not going to flipping do that, and if she did, you wouldn’t like it either (Grace Interview).
It is difficult to commodify caring. On the one hand Grace describes the childminder’s role in instrumental terms as ‘a job’, but on the other hand, she expects the woman ‘to cosset your kids’ (Grace Interview) and provide ‘love labour’ (Lynch 1989, 2008) for them.

**Valuation of childminders**

The most obvious evidence of women valuing their childminders is in the way they regard the issue of payment for the service provided. Women who commanded high salaries themselves could afford to pay their childminders higher wages, though not all did. Some women received loyalty and quality service in return for decent terms and conditions. ‘I would say that most of my salary would go out on childcare. Definitely. You end up with very little at the end, very little at the end of the month’ (Avril Focus group).

I also don’t stop wages for my childminder when I take holidays… I feel that she is entitled to get paid. I get paid sick pay, I get paid bank holidays so I don’t deduct her any of those things. So it comes back to that trust thing. I want her to look after my son. I am very happy with the way she is doing it, I will pay her for those days, I think she is fully entitled to them (Colleen Focus Group).
Colleen extends the benefits she receives in employment to the woman she
employs to care for her son. Avril and Colleen describe their satisfaction with
their childminding arrangements which they reported had been in place for
some time. While there is a hierarchical relationship between mothers and
childminders as in all employment relationships, Avril and Colleen demonstrate
they value their childminders and the work they do, and they employ their
childminders on equitable terms and conditions, extending to their childminders
the rights they receive from their employers.

Other women only pay childminders for the hours actually worked.

Well what made me… very cross, when I actually got her she
wanted to be paid for holidays, but I said ‘No’. She was quite
demanding about being paid for holidays… There was a week at
Christmas when I only worked one day and at New Year’s week
when I only worked one day, and I only paid her for the one day,
but she cribbed, big time, do you know. But, I don’t know. I feel
it’s dreadful to be paying out a hundred and forty quid when you
don’t have to (Florence, Focus group).

Florence works two twelve hour days each week, and pays her childminder
€140 per week, which equates to €5.83 per hour for minding three children, or
sixty-seven per cent of the National Minimum Wage. Florence claimed ‘it’s
dreadful to be paying out a hundred and forty quid when you don’t have to’, because there is no obligation on her to observe employment rights in relation to her childminder. Likewise, Yolanda agreed to pay holiday pay when engaging her childminder, but now regrets it

I have a week off at Easter and a week off at Christmas and four other weeks that I can take off during the year, and the arrangement that I made was that if I was off I’d pay her, but if she was off I wouldn’t. But I’m sorry for that now, because I pay her six weeks a year for doing absolutely nothing (Yolanda Focus Group).

Yolanda regards holiday pay for her childminder as payment for ‘doing absolutely nothing’. Both Yolanda and Florence are paid holiday pay by their employers, however, the nature of caring work, being in the home and invisible, does not carry the same entitlements as the formal employment relationships Florence and Yolanda enjoy.

It can be argued that the casual nature of private childminding is advantageous to employers and to childminders, because neither party has to commit to a contract of employment, or deal with the cost and administration of social insurance and income tax. However, materially more advantages accrue to employing households who do not have to comply with employment legislation or pay employers’ PRSI while childminders have no employment
protection and, when the employment ends, have no entitlement to social security.

The treatment of unregulated small scale private childminders is entirely at the discretion of employing women and households. There is a common tendency in policy and research to blame better-off women for exploiting poorer and low income women who care for children. However, as Lynch and Lyons (2008) argue, such an allegation is both profoundly gendered and sociologically misleading. Caring is not simply a woman’s responsibility, so men in households who hire women to care on exploitative terms are as culpable as their female partners. Weak labour laws and lack of enforcement of these laws also facilitate households employing childminders in domestic situations without regulation and proper wages. The problem is a policy one, not a personal one for individual women – but individual women are made to carry the moral responsibility because of the persistence of the gendered order of caring.

Childminders and welfare

The invisibility of private childminders working in domestic situations without employment protection and being paid low wages leads to a black market in childminding. It was reported that some childminders are also in receipt of welfare payments. Brona claimed two of her childminders had been claiming disability benefit to bolster their income from childminding.
And both of them are on-the-sick, [disability benefit] claiming all their benefits… And they’ve medical cards and everything…. But you see, there’s very little incentive for childminders as well, they don’t get paid an awful lot. But someone that’s on-the-sick that wants cash into their hand, there’s a whole underground industry there … I can understand why they do that too though (Brona Interview).

The combination of welfare and black market is complex. All workers in the black market have no social security and no employment protection. These are the ‘precariat’ (TASC 2009), those in precarious employment, working outside tax and social insurance networks with little or no job security, and little or no access to sick pay or pension entitlements or to other non-pay benefits. According to TASC (2009), their rates of pay are generally lower than those of the regular workforce, and unsurprisingly, the ‘precariat’ is dominated by women.

Participants discussed the relationship between childcare and welfare in one focus group discussion

Angela At the end of the day we are all responsible for that. You have people there, needed for the services industry, very low paid jobs, who are they? The women. The women will go into the
lower paid sector. And they’re needed. So if there’s a little small amount of those, and I’m not saying it’s a small amount, but if there’s a little fraction of those that are (.).

Brona Skimming.
Angela Screwing the system, that’s OK.
Freya I actually don’t blame people in many ways, they’re keeping the flow going.
Brona I don’t know how to remedy it you know, its sort of catch twenty two. I can see why women do it, because it does, on the lower paid jobs, it doesn’t really pay them to get a babysitter. It hardly pays me. But I’m just saying it’s a huge part of society. The amount of money that goes on it, and the people that get away with it.

Participants were not critical of individual women who claim welfare payments and mind children and acknowledge these women are necessary ‘to keep the flow going’, because these women provide childcare which is in short supply. Women who claim disability benefit and mind other women’s children are available in a scarce market, as they ‘will go into the lower paid sector’. Some of these women supplement their childminding income with welfare payments thereby reducing the cost of childminding for other ‘working mothers’.
There are 37,671 private childminders who enjoy no social protection as they are unregistered for taxation and social security and have no employment rights or protection under law (OECD 2002). Many of these childminders are believed to be untrained and are isolated by their informal status from networks of registered childminders. Care arrangements may come to an abrupt and sudden end at the discretion of either the minder or the parents (OECD 2002). Informal arrangements are precarious for parents as childminders are not registered with the HSE, have had no training and no Garda Clearance.

Amy had a situation which was dangerous, and which had a long term effect on herself and her family.

I suppose just the care here isn’t good, you know…Safe childcare. Safe. I think, like you know, we don’t know what our children are going into, and we don’t know where it’s going to take us if anything within that is going to change our lives forever, I think. And for me, that’s what happened. My first childcare placement here, was with somebody who changed, utterly changed my whole life. It was a bad, bad experience. It was just one experience, but…certainly before that I would have thought, ‘it’s ok to be a ‘working mother’’… And then… I started to look at the crèche across the road, where babies are being left off at eight o’clock in the morning. And with my second child…I didn’t want that kind of care for him, where he’d
be put into a room, even though again, you know, I wanted him to have one to one care, but that proved to be a mistake you know. So it was a price I paid, that I didn’t expect that I had to pay, and I suppose I resent the fact that there was no (.) there was nothing in place to prevent that from happening (Amy Interview).

Amy acknowledges the failure of the State to regulate private childminders and put structures ‘in place to prevent that from happening’. However, Amy also reported that the woman who was responsible for her ‘bad experience’ went on to mind other children. The criticism of crèche care is evident in Amy’s account, yet paradoxically, crèche care is the only type of care that is regulated in Ireland. Small scale private childminding is the most popular form of childcare, therefore the absence of regulation of private childminders raises questions about the reluctance of the State to address this issue. O’Connor and Murphy (2008) argue this delay in developing a childcare policy, combined with the lack of state intervention to support parenting and care work has reinforced women’s disadvantaged position in society. Care work continues to be seen, and addressed within a policy context, as predominantly a private concern and a female responsibility (O’Connor, Smithson and des Dores Goerreiro, 2002).
Conclusion

Choosing childcare is difficult, but essential, if women are to combine motherhood with paid work. In this study, women preferred family care, and in its absence expressed a preference for small scale private childminders rather than crèche care or childcare centres.

Women in different positions are better able to deal with the lack of regulated childcare. Women who availed of family care consider themselves most fortunate. Some women reduced their children’s time in paid care arrangements by combining family care with paid care. Women with economic resources can source and afford better care because they can employ childminders on better terms and conditions, though this does not guarantee satisfactory care arrangements. Women who employed childminders who supplement their childminding income with welfare payments were in the most precarious position as neither woman had security in the arrangement.

The State’s approach to childcare, facilitating grants for private and community childcare providers, supporting the voluntary sector, grant aiding training and incentivising compliance with Síolta, supports but does not ensure provision of adequate childcare services.

The invisibility of unregistered childminders is bad for individual low paid childminders and for society generally because it encourages the black market and welfare fraud. Childcare is maintained as each woman’s private concern and the lack of regulation of small scale private childminders can be precarious for ‘working mothers’, childminders and children.
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1 In this research I use the term ‘working mother’ to mean women with children who engage in paid work outside the home. Women who work full time in the home also work very hard indeed, but they are not the focus of my research and I use the term ‘working mother’ in single quotation marks to highlight problems of definition with the word work.


3 Barnardos; Childminding Ireland; Forbairt Naionraí Teo; IPPA The Early Childhood Organisation; Irish Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Association; National Children’s Nurseries Association and Saint Nicholas Montessori Teachers Association.

4 Children attend primary school for eight years, from age 5 to 13 years. In this study two same sex boys and two same sex girls schools facilitated recruitment of participants by sending participant letters home to mothers in the school bags of the children inviting women to contact me.