



Cat Coyle is juggling running the house and homeschooling sons Jarvis and Hunter while husband Daniel works from home.

PICTURE JASON EDWARDS

In the family business

In a post-COVID world, should mums be paid to stay at home and raise their children?

MARGARET AMBROSE

AS the parents of two children under 10, Cat and Daniel Coyle will tell you they work from the moment they wake up until the moment they drop into bed at night exhausted. Since the COVID-19 lockdown, Cat has been homeschooling the children and running the house, while Daniel works from home.

"We're both working," Cat says. "But with both of us at home, it's hard to ignore the fact that only one of us is being paid."

Like most of Australia, before COVID-19 Cat had long accepted her work caring for the couple's children was voluntary. As the owner of a successful mobile hairdressing business in Melbourne's inner west, she appreciated that she could fit her hours of paid work around school pick up, after-school activities, and all those other chores that go into running a family.

But now Cat has temporarily stopped hairdressing and she and Daniel, like most of their friends, are at home juggling paid work, childcare and homeschooling, the couple are finding the lines between the different forms of work have been blurred and are exposing the glaring inequity in paid and unpaid labour.

Now, as the country deals with the fallout of COVID-19, women's groups are joining the chorus of voices advocating for stay-at-home mothers to be paid.

Sarah Hill, YWCA's young women's development manager, says unpaid childcare in the home has always been a gendered issue.

"Even before the pandemic, women were completing an average of 74 per cent of unpaid care work in the home," she says.

"In the home during lockdown, when many families have two parents working at home, it's still really clear that women are still doing the majority of the childcare and domestic duties.

"Being a primary caregiver for children absolutely impacts women's financial wellbeing," Hill says, adding that financial disadvantage starts with the gender pay gap when women enter the workforce, and ends with substantially less superannuation on retirement.

"This gap increases enormously when women have children. (According to new research by The Grattan Institute) it's estimated that women with children earn about \$2 million less over their lifetime than men with children.

"We need to rethink the value of care work and how we recognise and compensate it."

According to Hill, the unpaid nature of raising children is a result of the lack of value that society puts on what has traditionally been seen as women's work.

"We have this bias thinking of females as inherently maternal."

No one knows this more than single mothers.

"Instead of recognising and financially compensating women for the work they do raising children, our society continues to blame and stigmatise them," says Jenny Davidson, CEO of the Council of Single Mothers and their Children (CSMC). "Just look at the ParentsNext program."

ParentsNext is a highly criticised government program, which claims to make single mothers "job ready" and requires single mothers to attend activities and comply with strict reporting requirements. Participation is mandatory for some parents, largely single mothers.

"ParentsNext undervalues the fact that single mothers already have a job providing

essential care for their children, plus other responsibilities," Davidson says.

"For women to ensure their children are adequately cared for, they need various supports — for some, this is the social security net, while for others this is accessing affordable childcare."

CSMC is adding its voice to the call for a post COVID-19 economy to include recognition and some sort of compensation for the child-raising work performed at home predominantly by women, although what form that might take is up for debate.

PAYING women to stay at home is not a new concept, and harks back to the 1970s when Wages for Housework campaigns started in Italy and quickly spread across developed countries.

"It has been long argued that care work should be not only recognised as essential to the economy, but also paid," Davidson says.

If that seems like a far-fetched concept, it shouldn't. We've long accepted that caring for

children is worthy of pay. Childcare workers are paid and the profession is heavily subsidised by the government.

"Children must be cared for by someone," Davidson says. "Why is it only legitimate if it is done by childcare workers?"

Another alternative being floated is the concept of a Liveable Income Guarantee, which would be paid at a rate equivalent to the aged pension, and come with other support payments such as rental assistance and family benefit payments.

"This liveable income guarantee wouldn't ever cover the value of such work," Davidson says. "But it would at least provide economic security."

While paying women to stay at home and raise their children may seem unachievable, Sarah Hill says there are steps we can take now to begin to compensate women for the work they perform — or at the very least make sure they are not disadvantaged because of it.

WE'RE BOTH WORKING ... BUT ONLY ONE OF US IS BEING PAID

"We can definitely support women with adequate policies," she says.

"One example might be ensuring that women are paid superannuation for the time they take away from the paid workforce."

Another option, she says, is to make childcare more affordable, which would allow a greater number of women to re-enter the workforce at the level they want to and not miss out on opportunities for career advancement and the opportunity to grow their income.

Opponents to any scheme to compensate mothers for the unpaid work they perform argue that as we face a worldwide recession with Australia experiencing historic levels of unemployment, we simply cannot afford it.

What a post-coronavirus society will look like is unknown, but if appropriate recognition and reward for unpaid work is to be a part of it, it's not going to come easy.

As renowned New Zealand feminist economist Professor Marilyn Waring famously said: "Men won't easily give up a system in which half the world's population works for next to nothing."