

NURSERIES: WHAT WE THINK WE NEED

The lack of facilities for child care makes life miserable for millions of women and children. Mothers are either imprisoned in the home, cut off from social life and under constant strain from the children's demands, or forced to entrust their children to baby minders who often lack the most elementary necessities for their play and development, or forced to pay out huge chunks of their hard-earned wages to keep their children in private nurseries. Council nurseries are normally available only to people with special problems---unmarried mothers, abandoned fathers, etc.---and a married woman whose husband earns has very little chance of getting her child into one of these.

So the demand for nurseries is obviously a vital one for feminist struggle. The question for us right now is how does this fit in with our demand for wages for housework?

Some people set the two against each other: "What we should be demanding," they say, "is not wages for housework but more nurseries: we want to encourage women to get out of the home, not pay them to stay in it."

First of all, this position is insulting to women: it implies that we must be manipulated---pushed out of the home or pushed in by financial incentives---and that what really matters is to apply the carrot or stick in the right direction.

More important, these people are setting up a false opposition. Wages for housework and better nursery facilities are not two antagonistic alternatives. They are two aspects of the same thing.

Perhaps we can begin to make this clear by showing that the lack of wages and the lack of nurseries reflect one fundamental condition: the slavery of women.

The experience of a group of women in Islington, who approached the council for some money to set up a community nursery, has brought this home to us in a vivid way.

Mothers in our area have to go out to work to make ends meet. Through bitter experience they know they need nurseries. But the life of working mothers is so hard-pressed that few of us can squeeze out the time to meet. This difficulty was our first big obstacle. The initial organising work fell (as usual) on the shoulders of a few resourceful and militant women in our community.

When we approached the Council, their attitude was that "self-help" is a good thing, but over generosity must be avoided at all costs. They do not see us as providing a social service that takes some of the burden off them, but as objects of charity. We are forced to beg, and like beggars we must worry about presenting the most acceptable face.

Far from taking responsibility for providing adequate child care for the community, the Council makes us struggle for every crumb of aid, while expecting us to go on contributing our free services. Finally they come up with a little money, loaded with conditions and restrictions, and expect us to be grateful for their 'generosity'.

The project we presented to the Council included a wage, equal for all those working in the nursery. They said our proposed wages were too high, and insisted on a differential between the "matron" and the domestic staff. The social worker expressed the view that since the women working in the nursery would otherwise have to stay home with their kids and would not be getting a wage anyway, they have no right to demand an "unrealistic" amount.

In other words, the amount women can demand for service work outside the home is determined by the fact that as housewives they get no wage.

Child care is work: it is a service without which society and the economic system could not function. Women at home have always done this work under slave conditions---that is, they are "supported" but get no wage. Those who hold power under the present system do not want to start paying women wages for doing this work at home, and our struggle with the Council is a clear example of how they are equally reluctant to pay wages to those doing this same work in nurseries.

What is important for us is not the question of which of these two things to demand---it is to have child care (and all housework) recognised as work that must be paid for like all other work, whether it is done inside or outside the home.

In this context then, how do we see the specific demand for nurseries? In other words, why do we want nurseries?

Today many of us are forced to take jobs by sheer need, and when we do we want our children to be looked after decently. But let's be quite clear that the point is not to enable us to take jobs outside the home, because that means double work for us. It is never a question of housework or outside work, but of both together, and that is no liberation for women.

What we really want is not two jobs that exhaust us physically and emotionally and provide very little money anyhow. We just want money. If we got wages for housework we could choose for ourselves whether to take another job or not.

But even with wages for housework, if we had that choice, we would still need nurseries. Because it is no good for us or our children to be cooped up alone in the house all day long. We want to be with our children and enjoy them, but you can't enjoy somebody who is on your neck all day long.

We want nurseries to give us freedom to live as we wish, and also to help our children to develop freely. And that means they have to be our nurseries, not institutions to regiment children and turn them into docile production workers.

We don't want to dump our children in badly-heated, half-derelict houses and church basements with unpaid or scantily-paid supervision and cast-off toys and furniture. We don't want to come, cap-in-hand, to councils and spend our precious time fundraising to keep the nurseries afloat.

Women are so used to "making^{do}", even in the Space Age. It is our traditional role: we are praised for managing on next to nothing. When we demand something more we are expected to be grateful for crumbs and---with our unpaid labour---to perform miracles.

Goodbye to all that. We don't want crumbs, we want the whole loaf.

We want clean, warm, spacious, well-equipped, attractive nurseries for our children; we want them to be looked after by plenty of well-paid people. And we don't want it as charity: it is our fundamental right as human beings.

--Members of the Power of Women Collective