
The ‘caring entrepreneur’? Childcare policy and private provision in an enterprising age

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Abstract. Childcare has become a recent focus of government intervention. Concerns have been raised about the soaring costs for parents, patchy provision, and the often small and unprofitable nature of the services themselves. This paper will explore how the problem of sustainability in the childcare sector is being addressed through a neoliberal development rationale. Focusing on the Irish childcare sector and the childcare funding programme introduced in 2006, I will illustrate how a particular entrepreneurial subjectivity has been mobilised to remedy the perceived problems of private sector childcare. I refer to this subjectivity as the ‘caring entrepreneur’. After I outline the contours of this subjectivity, the final section of the paper will examine how it is being realised within a rural childcare market, in the process offering a more situated account of what ‘sustainability’ means in place.

Keywords: childcare, subjectivity, entrepreneurship, place, Ireland

1 Introduction

In 2002 the winner of the Irish ‘Shell Livewire Young Entrepreneur of the Year’ was the owner of a private sector preschool service, selected from fourteen shortlisted national candidates for the prize.⁽¹⁾ Fifteen years previously a childcare service gaining recognition as an entrepreneurial business venture would have been unheard of in the Irish context, not least because much of the provision at that stage was in the informal economy. The growing demand for childcare provision over the past twenty years has raised considerable concerns for the governments of liberal welfare regimes (Lloyd and Penn, 2010; 2013). Such states have traditionally endorsed a private responsibility model for childcare, whereby care is understood to be primarily located within the family unit. However, the rise in female employment during this time has resulted in a ‘care crisis’ (Folbre, 2001), putting strain on working households to meet the demands of both the productive and the reproductive spheres and forcing governments to make childcare a public rather than private issue (Brannen and Moss, 2003). The inability for care needs to be met within the family has consequently led to a change in how, where, and by whom childcare is delivered and has necessitated the proliferation of extrafamilial care options for working parent(s). Although this initially led to a growth in childminders and nannies in many contexts, reflecting the continued spatial association of care with the home (Gregson and Lowe, 1995), more recent policy interventions in countries like the UK and Ireland have led to the prioritisation of centre-based care.⁽²⁾ Moreover, while there has been some extension of the role of public and voluntary providers, particularly in socially disadvantaged areas through programmes such as Sure Start UK,

⁽¹⁾See ‘Wilmott Childcare wins Shell Livewire Award’ in the RTE Business News on 16 May 2002, <http://www.rte.ie/business/2002/0516/awards.html>

⁽²⁾For example, under the UK Sure Start programme the number of childcare centres was planned to increase to 3500 by 2010 (Glass, 2006).

the majority of provision over the past decade has been in the private rather than the public sector.⁽³⁾

Despite growing reliance on the private sector for the delivery of childcare, there are significant policy concerns about the viability and sustainability of marketised forms of childcare (Campbell-Barr, 2009; Lloyd and Penn, 2010; Penn, 2007). As a highly feminised form of labour, childcare businesses experience limitations which are understood to be common to women's business ownership in general (Nadin, 2007). These include: women's inability to access enterprise networks and business knowledges (Mattis, 2004; Weiler and Bernasek, 2001); their tendency to run small businesses with little expansion or growth over time (Still and Timms, 2000); and the ways in which they access financial institutions differently from men (Blake, 2006; Orhan, 2001). Given the increasingly prominent role which childcare now occupies in achieving new social and economic policy agendas (Smith et al, 2008), the instability of the sector compromises the achievement of these aims. The outcome for government has been an attempt to instil greater business and managerialist skills into the sector in order to make services more sustainable in an increasingly competitive care market [see Osgood (2004) for a discussion of the UK context].

With these changes in mind, in this paper I have two key aims. Firstly, I will consider how private sector childcare is being reimagined through policy in ways which accord with a growing emphasis on competitive and marketised forms of provision. While there has been much work in geography on the marketisation of care as part of a broader interest in processes of neoliberalisation (see, for example, England et al, 2007; van Riemsdijk, 2010), childcare has not received the same level of attention as other forms of care. Indeed, Penn has noted the position of childcare academics and advocates in the UK as problematic in this regard, such that "they believe that early childhood could or should be an exception to the trend towards privatisation" (2007, page 193). While Ireland has not featured heavily in this literature to date, the changes taking place since 2006 can, nevertheless, speak to broader changes across other liberal welfare regimes (such as processes of professionalisation and marketisation). In addressing a perceived absence in the literature, this paper will use a governmentality approach to explore how childcare is being problematised through policy and the kinds of solutions being envisaged as part of the move towards more marketised forms of provision.

Through analysis of the childcare development programme I argue that the sector is being redesigned around the emergence of a new subjectivity of care. However, the kind of subject which the programme has given rise to is not necessarily what was anticipated. To illustrate this I move beyond an analysis of imagined subjectivities to examine how a move towards more marketised forms of provision is actually shaping the business practices of providers within rural childcare services. While much of this is occurring under the rationale of greater sustainability in the sector, I argue that generalised understandings of sustainability, deployed through policy as a concern for the continued viability of the sector in the face of social and economic change, needs to be more attentive to what 'sustainability' actually means for providers and how they practise childcare in place.

2 Creating childcare markets

For the past thirty years the logic of the market has been deployed in the redesign of welfare provision, a characteristic which has been associated with neoliberalism (Harvey, 2007). The introduction of market mechanisms to the running of public services has been used as a means of reforming what has come to be seen as a burdensome and costly welfare architecture (Rom, 1999). One significant outcome of this trend has been the gradual withdrawal of the

⁽³⁾In the UK, private provision increased by 70% between 2002 and 2012 (Penn and Lloyd, 2013), and in Australia the number of for-profit services rose by 400% from 1991 to 2001 (Sumsion, 2006).

state as provider of services; instead, the state assumes a role as overseer to a diverse range of actors, located increasingly in the private and third sectors (Milligan and Conradson, 2006). Framed through discourses of 'efficiency' and 'flexibility' (Clarke, 2004), users of services are repositioned as consumers in an increasingly 'DIY' welfare state (Mohan, 2002). Through exercising our agency as 'rational economic actors', we are anticipated to regulate both the type of services required and the cost of such services. In this process the onus is on providers, across diverse sectors, to offer services which address and are adaptable to complex and changing societal needs (Milligan, 2007; Pinch, 1997).

Yet despite the supposed benefits of the market for the delivery of welfare, the provision of care through the market has been heavily criticised (Green and Lawson, 2011; Lawson, 2007; McDowell et al, 2005). As has been illustrated with regard to childcare, reliance on market mechanisms to fuel and regulate the childcare sector has produced patchy and limited provision (England, 1996), with soaring costs for parents (Viitanen, 2005) and poor wages for workers (Haylett, 2003; Wainwright et al, 2011). Secondly, the assumption that 'choice' is something which can be exercised equally by all within the market has been shown to be fundamentally flawed. Vincent et al (2008) suggest that variation in income is a significant factor shaping the ability of parents to choose between childcare services in liberal welfare regimes, reducing the range of possible choices for many households (see also McDowell et al, 2005).

But childcare provision through the market also 'fails' in other ways, which reflect its place as a form of gendered labour in society. As has been well illustrated, the prioritisation of the ideals of individualism and independence over societal interdependence has had destructive impacts on the provision and organisation of childcare labour (Lawson, 2007; McDowell, 2004). As a consequence, care has remained a devalued form of work, even as it moves from the hidden confines of the private sphere to the private sector. The highly feminised nature of the childcare sector has also posed concerns about how care services are being run and by whom, acknowledging the marked gender impediments for women in business (Nadin, 2007). Consequently the financial viability and sustainability of childcare services in an increasingly competitive environment has been called into question by governments (Campbell-Barr, 2009; Osgood, 2004).

The limitations of marketised childcare outlined above sit in tension with the prominent place it now occupies in achieving new social and economic policy agendas for families and children within liberal welfare regimes (Lister, 2006; Wainwright et al, 2011). While concerns about childcare provision have moved from being a private to a public issue, in general this has not signified an increase in public sector provision. Instead, the private sector remains a key source of care for many households and is regarded as the sector which will be best positioned to absorb change in demand for care (Lloyd and Penn, 2010). Consequently the limitations to childcare as a business have led to it becoming a problem for government in many contexts.⁽⁴⁾ Yet how can the practices of private care services be altered to adapt to a more competitive environment if they remain outside the direct reach of traditional forms of government?

The difficulty posed, in terms of intervening and changing the practices of private sector childcare, reflects one of the fundamental problems of governing under advanced liberal forms of rule (Rose, 1999; Rose et al 2006). As Foucault identified, liberal practices of rule operate through the production of a world of autonomous, free subjects. However, the basis of such freedom is ambiguous. The self-determining 'free' individual is constituted through

⁽⁴⁾ See for example the discussion around a recent decision by the UK government to invest £2 million in childcare businesses at <http://www.gov.uk/government/news/maria-miller-women-at-the-heart-of-growth-economic-reality-not-political-correctness>

processes of subjection, through which his or her freedom is shaped. In order to act freely, the subject has to be shaped to understand how to use this freedom responsibly. According to Rose (1999), advanced liberal forms of rule do not seek to govern through 'society' as such, but through the shaped choices individuals make as subjects of self-actualisation and self-fulfilment.

From a governmentality perspective, then, neoliberalism is seen less as an overarching and cohesive political project, exercised equally over space and time, and more as a fragmented and highly contingent mentality of government which exists alongside others in society (Kingfisher, 2002; Ong, 2007). As such, the extension of market rationality, as a means through which solutions to social and economic problems are envisioned, has been a defining feature of a neoliberal mentality of government. Markets and market conditions are not 'natural' in their emergence, but are actively constructed through the connection of thought (the discursive terrain in which the problems of government are framed and made visible) and technical practices (the more programmatic means of acting on a problem) (Lemke, 2002; Newstead, 2009).

In conducting an analytics of government, geographers have drawn attention to the often banal aspects of governing, such as governmental policies and programmes, as a means of understanding how neoliberal forms of government manifest in different and often unpredicted ways across space. Indeed, a number of these studies have suggested that the constitution of entrepreneurial subjectivities, capable of operating in competitive market environments, is a key aspect in the making of markets. Focusing on development in the Global South, Walker et al (2008) examine how technical assistance programmes in Mexico intersect with processes of neoliberalisation in order to render local communities more 'entrepreneurial' in their engagement with global markets for their craft. In the process the practices of existing communities have been problematised as deficient in the skills necessary to succeed in these markets. In a similar vein Rankin's (2001) work on microcredit programmes in Nepal explores how the success of such programmes is based on the emergence of a particular entrepreneurial subjectivity, one which she identifies as 'rational economic woman'. Intended as a means of alleviating poverty in the region, responsibility for managing small business loans is placed on women in these communities whose perceived gendered skills of financial prudence and concern for the survival of their families and communities have made them reliable as investment subjects. Although they focus on quite different contexts, these studies illustrate the significant political work which takes place in order to produce both the subjects and the conditions for markets. They also speak to my interests in this paper in that they move beyond looking solely at how entrepreneurial subjects are imagined through development programmes and consider the specific articulation of these subjectivities in place.

Drawing on this work, this paper will firstly examine how the figure of the 'caring entrepreneur' has been imagined as part of the creation of a childcare market and, secondly, consider how that figure is being realised within a rural childcare market. I suggest that attempts to make childcare more economically 'sustainable' has hinged on the constitution of this subjectivity. It is on the success of this figure that much of the heightened expectations on the role of childcare within social and economic policy agendas rests. In the next section I outline the specifics of the childcare sector in Ireland in order to allow for a more situated understanding of the emergence of the 'caring entrepreneur'.

3 The research context

This paper is based on the findings of research conducted during the summer of 2008.⁽⁵⁾ One of the primary aims of the research was to understand the changes being brought about to private sector childcare in Ireland as a result of the formalisation of the sector since 2000. In total, all fifty-nine registered private sector services in counties Cavan and Monaghan, on the northern border of the republic, were contacted. Twenty-nine providers agreed to participate and a semistructured interview was conducted with each owner/manager. Interviews were also conducted with the County Childcare Committee (CCC) in each county. Given the highly competitive nature of the sector, there was a concern on the part of the providers that information might be transmitted between services. Thus confidentiality was an important ethical component of the project, and one which had to be made clear before providers would agree to an interview. Although interviewees were speaking within the bounds of the discursive structures which shaped their experiences as care providers, using interviews reflected the feminist politics of this research, which sought to account for the lived experiences of these women as owner/managers as much as the programmatic and policy changes which shape their daily lives. To protect the identity of participants, their names have been changed in this paper. Interview transcripts were analysed based on a thematic system of coding, similar to that used by James (2006).

Understanding the socioeconomic dynamics which shaped childcare provision in the research sites was crucial to producing a more situated analysis. The research sites of Cavan and Monaghan are located in the border region of the country. From 1999 economic development in Ireland became understood in relation to differences between the border and the southeast region, when the border region was designated an area in need of economic and social renewal under the EU Lisbon Treaty (1999). Within the border region, both Cavan and Monaghan are understood to have 'agricultural economies in transition' (McNerney and Gillmor, 2005), notably moving into areas of food processing and manufacturing in Monaghan and leisure and tourism in Cavan. Despite the economic growth associated with the 'Celtic Tiger', female labour-participation rates in the region at the time of the Census in 2006 were well below the national average of 52% (CSO, 2006)—at 46% in Cavan and 40% in Monaghan. Undoubtedly, the current financial crisis and downturn in employment has impacted significantly on the work of these women and on their ability to operate their childcare businesses, reflecting the highly fluctuating and interdependent nature of childcare provision.

While female entrepreneurship has been encouraged nationally (Forfás, 2007), there has been a concerted effort to encourage female businesses opportunities in the border region particularly through local mentoring programmes,⁽⁶⁾ start-up grants from the county development boards, and broader business skills training with a focus on female business needs. As Ekinsmyth (2011) has suggested from her analysis in the UK, female entrepreneurship has become a particularly pronounced phenomenon in rural communities—in part, because of the relative lack of alternative employment for women (see also Oberhauser, 2002). Indeed, childcare has been identified as one area in which women can find business opportunities, and in turn as a potential source of employment for women [Osgood (2004) also discusses this with relation to the UK]. In Ireland childcare has undergone particular attention in line with the growing financial involvement of the state through its various childcare development programmes [notably the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000–06 and the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) 2006–10]. Since 2000 there has been a steady increase in business training and advice specifically for care providers. This training

⁽⁵⁾The research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council UK and the University of Bristol, 2006–09.

⁽⁶⁾For example, the programme Women in the Network.

has come through the CCC, charged with monitoring and developing the service base in each county, and through the emergence of national-level groups such as the Childcare Business Development Network. Efforts to promote business training for providers have been further consolidated by the creation of the Childcare Business Development Network Skillnet in 2006 and more recently the National Childrens Nurseries Association (NCNA) Childcare Skillnet.⁽⁷⁾ According to their website, the aim of the programme is to “change the face of childcare through networking, collaboration and value for money training programmes delivered to meet the specific needs of your childcare service” (Skillnets, 2008).

There were a number of similarities among the participants in the research group. All were women, as childcare in Ireland remains highly feminised, with less than 1% of the workforce male (CSO, 2005). The majority of the participants were married or had long-term partners, which was an important aspect in how they experienced financial risk with regard to the development programme, something which will be discussed later in the paper. The services were typically small, both in the size of the premise and the number of children they cared for (ranging from twelve up to forty children). All employed at least one member of staff and all except five of the participants owned their own premises. Over half were located in an extension to, or in a separate building in the grounds of, their own homes, with the remaining participants operating from purchased residential houses which were converted in line with the *Preschool Services Regulations* (Department of Health and Children, 1997). Decision making around where they chose to establish their business spoke to ideas about mitigating financial risk within rural economies and was an important aspect determining how they experienced running their business. This aspect will be discussed in the final section of this paper.

Finally, while I critique some of the fundamental aspects of how the NCIP was organised and rolled out, it is important to state that overall the programme was viewed favourably by the women in this research. The last ten years have witnessed a considerable change in how childcare is provided in Ireland, shifting from what was largely informal and unregulated care provided by childminders to the expansion of a formalised and highly qualified workforce. The development programme was seen as the final step in a long line of governmental interventions which has raised awareness of childcare as a skilled practice and as a sector with business potential for women.

4 Envisioning the ‘caring entrepreneur’

This section is based on a Foucauldian-inspired discourse analysis of the second childcare development programme, the NCIP (2006–10). I was interested in the new ways of thinking about and problematising childcare as a sector that had emerged through policy over the last ten years. In particular, I focused on two things: first, how private sector childcare was discussed as a problem through the programme and, second, how the programme sought to act on and remedy these problems. I will argue that the development programme is scripted around an imagined subjectivity, one which I have called the ‘caring entrepreneur’, and it is this figure which is envisioned as central to the success of the sector.

One of the primary aims of the NCIP was to encourage the development of a private childcare sector, to the extent that it would ultimately provide 48% of the 33 000 new childcare places envisioned by 2010. Ireland has traditionally had a strong informal economy of care, a sector primarily occupied by female childminders (Office of the Minister for Children, 2000). The work of childminders has tended to be small scale and went unregulated by the state until 1997 when the *Preschool Regulations Act* was introduced (Department of

⁽⁷⁾ This programme is supported by the National Training Fund through the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (<http://www.skillnets.ie>).

Health and Children, 1997). Although the Preschool Regulations Act makes reference to childminding services and the important role childminding continues to play in meeting the needs of working households, the subsequent development programme sought instead to prioritise funding into childcare centres to increase the number of available childcare places. A similar deprioritisation of childminding in policy has been observed in the UK in favour of private day nurseries, notably childcare chains (Penn and Randall, 2005). The National Childcare Strategy (Office of the Minister for Children, 2000) justified expenditure into centre-based care in the following way:

“Many childcare centres are not meeting the standards required under the Regulations and are opting to close rather than make the investment required. Their profit margins are often too narrow to meet the costs of increased staff ratios and of the physical improvement required. The majority of these are small scale providers who provide the service in their own home” (page xxi).

Indeed, a survey of childcare services in 1998 found that of all preschool services just over 50% were being run from converted homes (Goodbody Economic Consultants, 1998). Centre-based care has therefore been seen to offer the greatest possibility to meet programme targets around childcare places (Gallagher, 2012) and offers the potential to become viable as a business in the process.

The NCIP was introduced in 2006 and, along with its predecessor funding programme, sought to inject approximately €1 billion into the creation of a new childcare infrastructure. The programme made available capital funding for private providers to develop their care facility in line with the regulations: 75% of the capital required to improve or build the care facility was offered, up to a limit of €100 000; the provider would contribute the remaining 25% (Department of Health and Children, 2006). Under the terms of this ‘co-investment’, if the service fails within the first seven years the owner/manager is indebted to the state for the sum received. While the state cannot force any provider to up-skill their business knowledge, it is clear that if they aspire to receive capital funding they will have to meet certain criteria preset in the programme. As the Cavan CCC co-ordinator explained:

“We would be encouraging everyone now who wants to set up to do out a detailed business plan for themselves. This is really important to do if they either want to apply for funding now, or in the future, as it covers their needs assessment and value for money requirements.”

From a governmentality perspective, this programme can be seen as ‘technology of government’ (Rose, 1999), working at arm’s length to shape the practices of private providers through coercive means. In applying for funding there are a range of expectations which the programme has with regard to the business skills of the applicant: notably, the ability to produce a business plan detailing the short-term and long-term targets (such as projected numbers of staff and children). While having a business plan and setting targets is widely accepted ‘good business practice’, these techniques are relatively new in the context of childcare.

One of the primary roles of the CCCs has been to prepare funding applicants. Since 2006 CCCs have been given a more pronounced role in screening applicants, to the extent that they have to preapprove all those who apply before they can be considered for funding (Fitzpatrick Associates Economic Consultants, 2005). In this role they have become highly influential in shaping the skills now needed by providers in establishing their service. One of the main impediments identified to women in business has been their inability to integrate into local networks and resources (Hanson and Blake, 2009). Building on this identified limitation, one CCC coordinator stated:

“You have to remember that these are women who might have never ran a business before, most of them haven’t. They possibly don’t even know anyone who does. So it’s up to us to advise them on how to go about it, and one of the best ways of doing that is to get them to network with other business owners, especially women owners.”

In attempting to remedy this problem, CCCs have sought to embed providers into broader local and regional enterprise networks by referring them to other groups which operate as support networks for businesses. In the process it is anticipated that they will adopt the practices of other business owners. Within the research areas these networks included the County Enterprise Boards and the local Women in the Network (WIN), which is a female-led business mentoring scheme in the border region. Siobhan, a Cavan based provider who had received NCIP funding, explained why she was encouraged to go to WIN for business advice.

A: "Do you get any business advice?"

S: "Yeah. Em, POBAL sometimes, but more so Women in the Network which are women in business in the county. They are very supportive. I mean, when I set up the business after I came home from the UK and they helped me with advertising and all of that. Even going to chat with them is helpful, to get some business advice off them, you know. And I mean I may be only one of the few childcare providers there, but it's just women setting up business. It's good to have someone to talk to, because they give good all-round advice to women starting out in business."

Encouraging providers to see the points of commonality between themselves and other female business owners instils a greater understanding of *how* childcare can be structured as a business. While the providers are not forced to attend network meetings or to acquire business knowledge, there is an element of subtle coercion built into the running and organisation of the programme such that providers will learn to self-govern in terms of the skills they need to acquire. If they do not, their chances of success in applying for funding is significantly diminished. Even if they are successful, they are understood to be individually responsible, to act on this knowledge, and to carry the financial risk of not doing so, such that if their service fails, responsibility is firmly placed on the shoulders of the provider despite the highly fluctuating and uncertain nature of childcare markets. I suggest that the subjectivity aspired to here is one which is ruled less by the emotional aspects of care giving and more by the capability of making daily decisions based on the viability of the service as a profit-making venture. Through encouraging the emergence of the subjectivity of 'caring entrepreneur' it is anticipated that private sector childcare will be made more 'sustainable'.

5 Place, entrepreneurship, and rural childcare markets

In the previous section I sought to outline the contours of the 'caring entrepreneur' and highlight the processes through which this subjectivity is being constituted. However, a focus on processes of subjectification within governmentality analyses has come under criticism from a number of fronts over the last ten years. Some have suggested that the emphasis placed on discourse in analysing processes of subjectification has focused too much attention on programme and policy (Barnett, 2005). Secondly and by extension, there is an underlying assumption of the subject as 'hailed' into being through discourse, leaving little room for subjectification processes to be analysed as open ended and unfinished. As McKee (2009, page 473) suggests, "what has been a preference to disregard the messy empirical actualities results in a fundamental inability to account for why the governable subject, constituted through discourse, fails to turn up in practice."

Taking these concerns into account, in this section I will explore what the subjectivity of the 'caring entrepreneur' looks like within a rural childcare market. In the process I will contribute to knowledge on rural childcare an aspect which is largely absent from the existing literature [with the exception of Halliday and Little (2001) and Smith and Barker (2001)]. According to Ekinsmyth (2011), there is need for a greater conceptualisation of the relationships between home and family life when it comes to understanding female entrepreneurship. In so doing we can draw attention to the relationship between embodiment, identity, and forms of

labour regarded as 'women's work' (see also Anderson, 2008). The level at which research on entrepreneurship has tended to be conducted has not, however, been conducive to capturing these relationships. As Hanson (2009) has shown, studies of female entrepreneurship, while distinctly embedded in the 'local' are rarely analysed at that level. In response, she illustrates how an understanding of the local can give insights into how experiences of entrepreneurship are shaped by place and, in turn, how places themselves can be changed through practices of entrepreneurship. Change in this sense is more than economic but, as Hanson suggests, should incorporate the impact of female entrepreneurs through a much broader lens of well-being, one which encompasses families and communities. Indeed, much has been written about the gendered nature of employment in rural communities and the ways in which women's experiences of work are shaped by and through existing gender relations (Deseran and Simpkins, 1991; Little and Austin, 1996). Drawing on this work, this section offers a situated analysis of how the figure of the 'caring entrepreneur' has been realised in the border region.

5.1 Risk management and the home as a site of care

One of the concerns raised by way of justification for capital funding in the sector was the use of the home space as the site of care. As cited earlier, the National Childcare Strategy stated that reliance on the home space had led to smaller services with limited profit to reinvest into the development of the service itself. Despite this concern, the providers interviewed continued to see the home space as crucially important to the running of their childcare businesses. Although not all of the interviewees worked from their own homes, the use of residential buildings was common among those who chose to rent or purchase a separate property for their service. The continued reliance of the women interviewed on the home as a site for childcare delivery suggests that working from residential buildings is closely interwoven into the practice of care in the Irish context (Gallagher, 2013). Moreover, using a home-like building was understood by providers as something which distinguished how they engaged with the development programme differently from those in urban environments, in which they felt the opportunities for growth and replacement of numbers was better. As one owner/manager in Cavan explained:

"It's different for those in Dublin or places like that, they have the pick of parents using their services. It's all well and good for them to spend money on their service, make it 'purpose built' and all of that because they have higher demand than we do in places like Cavan. I don't think it's fair that the programme expects the same thing of us all, it doesn't work the same way here."

There was a keen sense of difference expressed by providers with regard to their counterparts in other locations, particularly in more urban areas. While the programme is national in scope, working with the individual CCCs to address specific need in each county, the importance of context for how the programme is experienced is absent from the expectations placed on providers.

Ideas about risk management were at the forefront of the decision making of providers when it came to applying for capital funding. Indeed, one of the key criticisms of women-owned business more generally has been a reluctance to take on higher levels of risk, which has meant that women tend to operate smaller enterprises (Merrett and Gruidl, 2000). While the strategies which women deploy in order to mitigate risk in business have been explored (Brindley, 2005), few have considered the mitigation of risk as a spatial process. For the providers in this study, maintaining a facade of 'homeliness' as part of their business offered an important means of limiting their financial exposure through the development of the service. Being able to return a property to a residential form, in circumstances where the service has failed, was seen as a crucial means of protecting them and their families from

capital loss, whether that be their own home or a purchased property. In instances where the business fails, the building could be reconverted and sold or reintegrated into the grounds of their family home. The problematisation of the home space through the programme misses the importance of this space to the management of financial risk within the border region and the particular importance this plays in rural childcare markets.

5.2 Life partners and the gendered experiences of 'co-investment'

The NCIP has sought to address female owner/managers as individuals with whom it can co-invest to create or expand the service. In making this 'co-investment' there has been an attempt to constitute an entrepreneurial subject who is capable of running the service as a sustainable business (and by extension to ensure that monies invested by the state are invested into a profitable enterprise). As Blake (2006) has highlighted, there is a significant gendering of the lending processes when it comes to supporting female-owned businesses. One possible reason for this is the areas in which women tend to establish their businesses (often in service sector work). Such sectors tend to have a high perception of risk of failure associated with them (Anna et al, 2000). Indeed, when measuring private sector childcare against normative ideas of good business practice and financial risk, it does look like a risky venture. Arguably, this is even more pronounced in areas like Cavan and Monaghan, where employment levels are unstable and forms of work for women, in what is still a predominantly agricultural economy, are limited.

While the childcare development programme has sought to preempt the difficulties in accessing funding through the established lending institutions, applicants still have to find 25% of the amount sought in order to meet their commitment to the programme. For most, this has involved the local lending institutions. As Jane discussed,

"Yeah, I went to the bank, who we have been dealing with all our lives, to ask for the €18000 I needed. I explained what it was for and that the remaining money for the work on the service would, hopefully, come from the funding scheme. It was approved providing that I got the grant, otherwise it would not be sufficient to do the work needed. They seemed happy enough knowing it would be backed up by the scheme and that we had the farm and house to take the loan out against. I wouldn't have gotten it otherwise, not around here with the economy the way it is."

Despite securing a loan from the bank, the funding process has been scripted in such a way as to place considerable short-term financial pressure on providers. Many spoke about the difficulties posed by the time lag between sourcing the finances for their part of the contract and the first downpayment from the funding scheme. According to the terms of the scheme, funding is granted by the state only *after* the expenses have been incurred by the provider, meaning that they have to secure the money in advance to do the work and effectively get reimbursed once the work has been vetted. As a result, many interviewees had to juggle bridging loans while waiting for the programme funding, a situation which caused considerable personal stress.

Common amongst almost all of the women interviewed was the inability to access funding without a husband or father to invest financially in their venture or to guarantee a loan with the lending institutions. While providers ultimately had responsibility for running and organising the service after the finances had been granted, without a 'silent partner' most could not have gotten that far by themselves. As Clare explains below, her husband's name had to go on the mortgage deeds to allow her to purchase the bungalow she then turned into a Montessori crèche:

"Yeah, I run it by myself. It's all my own design. My husband is on the mortgage deeds though, because he had to be! Looking at the income of this place, after you take out the wages and overheads, it's not something the bank would give a loan out for easily."

So he is down as a partner, but it's my business. He's my *silent* partner" (emphasis by interviewee, Clare, Monaghan).

The survival of her childcare business is tied in complex ways to the success of Clare's personal life. She, like many others, relied on her husband to support her venture from the start, both emotionally and financially. If anything changed in their personal lives she would legally have little control over what happened to her premises: her claim to the facility would be through her position as his wife, rather than that of an independent business owner. Thus, in many ways the development and success of the childcare service is intricately woven into the fabric of the personal lives of the providers.

Indeed, for those who did not have a partner to rely on for financial and emotional support, the terms of the funding programme were in themselves too risky. As one provider explained:

"A few other people who I knew in the area and had been doing it in their own homes went in for it [funding] and I heard through them about the amazing amount of paperwork to be done and scrutiny in the beginning to get it. They had to get out bridging loans to meet the deficit until the payments came down through the programme. Any of my colleagues who I knew had partners to lean on financially for that, but I wasn't in that position. I was self-employed here and not only was my business being run in one end of the house, I lived in it! So if anything went bust, I lost everything. It was a huge gamble for me to take on that kind of debt at the time, and with one thing and another I never ended up applying" (Suzy, Cavan).

As Suzy describes, having the support of a partner in entering this venture is a crucial aspect in allowing these women to meet the financial demands of the programme. More than that, however, many spoke about the confidence they had to open the business, knowing that their husbands and partners were backing them and felt it was something they could succeed in. Although as Green and Cohen (1995, in Anderson, 2008) caution, female entrepreneurship can in many ways be seen as a 'hegemonic process', letting women feel empowered while they are still positioned in inequitable social systems.

5.3 Business target setting as a negotiated practice

As many feminist geographers have illustrated, the provision of childcare involves the financial and emotional lives of two households: the carers and the cared for (McDowell et al, 2005; Pratt, 2003). Despite an emphasis being placed on the importance of target projections as part of the funding application process, the movement of women in and out of the labour force to manage reproductive responsibilities and the ability to find other sources of care [grandparents (Wheelock and Jones, 2002), childminders, or nannies (Pratt, 2003)] makes the childcare business wholly unpredictable from month to month. The increase in the number of childcare services through the injection of capital funding into the sector has led to a highly competitive local environment for providers in which they are vying for a limited number of children in the local area. Indeed, key to the emergence of childcare markets has been an emphasis on increasing the choices available to parents as consumers of care. However, in rural economies where the number of families and children is limited, this has placed considerable pressure on new providers to attract parents to use their service. As Rochelle describes, for a new service the first year and a half are particularly trying as parents are unwilling to disrupt their children from an existing service until they are confident about the longevity of your facility:

"Displacement is a big problem now. When we put in for funding, we have to do a local needs analysis as part of our business plan which involves speaking with parents in the area. Of course people say 'oh yeah, I'd use that facility' and all that. So you work on that information. But the reality is that people might not use the service at all. So granny might be looking after the child, they might have other arrangements by the time you open.

But until you open your doors and are open for at least twelve to eighteen months you don't know who's going to use your service. Then there's a perception with parents that, well, I might wait twelve months to see how it's going because if I take her out of the crèche she's in at the minute, the other might fall through" (Rochelle, Cavan).

The reluctance to move children to a newly opened service is closely linked to how childcare services are advertised and sought out within parenting communities (Holloway, 1998). While the new service may be more convenient to some parents as they are en route to and from work, there is still an initial period during which time the reputation of the service needs to be established.

Heightened levels of competition have also meant that providers have had to adapt their practices, often in contradiction to what may be seen as 'good' business practice. The emotional labour involved in caring for another's child and becoming closely involved with the local parental group places considerable tension on providers when trying to operate as a business [see Boyer et al (2012) for an insightful discussion of the emotional work of care]. Many providers discussed the trade-off they have to make in negotiating fees with parents, particularly where household circumstances had changed. In the process they have had to plan a longer term strategy around care to the neglect of their short-term budget targets. As Mairead explained:

"Well, it's like this. If a parent comes to me and says they have lost a job or whatever, I have to try to be understanding of that, for the sake of the child as much as the need to keep the numbers up. So what I usually do is charge them a reduced rate until they are back on their feet. Otherwise, I could lose that family altogether. She might have more children and it would be really important to us to keep them with us. It's the same kind of thing when we take on looking after babies. With the child-staff ratio, there is no profit to be made in caring for babies. We make a loss. But you look at the longer term. You know that once they get a bit older and to the 'waddler' stage where the ratio is higher, then it changes and the mother may have more children, so it's in our interest long term to accept that initial loss" (Mairead, Cavan).

While such practices have become crucial for the survival of services in rural childcare markets, particularly with the significant downturn in employment since 2008 (CSO, 2011), providers felt it was almost impossible to rationalise their actions within the existing auditing system, a system which allowed little space for the 'messiness' of the relational work of care. Although the Pre School Regulations have set standards in terms of the quality of care within these settings, the business targets being monitored by POBAL (the funding programme evaluation body) has limited providers' ability to adjust to parental changes. To that extent, many suggested that processes of target setting as a means of knowing and running their business was a very limited resource in helping them to plan from month to month.

6 Conclusion

Over the last decade private sector childcare has become increasingly relied upon by government in order to meet new social and economic policy agendas. Despite the reliance on this sector, however, its development has been hampered by longstanding and entrenched problems in large part associated with the gendered nature of the work itself. To remedy these problems, there has been an attempt to extend the managerial and business skills of providers and better position them to compete in the emerging childcare market. This paper has examined one such attempt by the Irish government. Using a governmentality approach, I have explored how private sector childcare has become a problem for government and the means through which problems in the sector were to be remedied. The creation of a more sustainable childcare market has been predicated on the emergence of a new subjectivity of care, one which is capable of running a competitive and profitable childcare business.

As has been illustrated elsewhere, the production of markets under a neoliberal development rationale has been based on the constitution of particular kinds of idealised entrepreneurial subjects, capable of operating in a competitive environment. In the case of the rural childcare sector, this impetus is giving rise to new subjectivities of care, offering new possibilities and limitations for providers in the delivery of their service.

However, I aspired to do more in this paper than solely account for the kinds of imagined subjectivities of care which are being called into existence. I have sought to move beyond an examination of changes in care provision at the programme level, to consider how this is actually shaping the business practices of providers within rural childcare services. In doing so I have offered a more situated account of what entrepreneurship and business sustainability means for rural childcare providers. Indeed, this analysis, grounded in the 'local', has exposed tensions in the way in which the childcare sector has been problematised through the development programme. To illustrate this further I return to the story with which I began this paper. The winner of the Young Entrepreneur of the Year in 2002 made the headlines again in 2010 amid accusations of overcrowding, her service having grown from 70 children in 2001 to 138 in 2010. In many ways this is a cautionary tale of the growing pressure providers are under to meet business demands, potentially at the expense of the care aspects of the service. Indeed the ongoing effects of the 2008 financial crisis will pose a considerable challenge to the business models of such services, as high levels of job loss in the border region will have direct effects on their viability [total unemployment rose from 9.9% to 27.5% between 2005 and 2011 (CSO, 2011)]. The ability of these women to downsize, reconvert, and negotiate changing family situations may mean that government investment into the sector is not lost through the shock of the economic downturn and mass closure of services. Understanding this requires greater attention to the context in which these services operate and a more attentive understanding of what childcare 'sustainability' actually means in place.

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