

FAMILY

Trapped by European-style Socialism—And I Love It!

Maybe working moms *can* have it all—in France.

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France's President Francois Hollande visits the *crèche* of the Elysee Palace in Paris

Photo by Fred Dufour/AFP/Getty Images.

The coming presidential election represents a choice, says Mitt Romney: a choice between evil European-style socialism and good old American can-do capitalism. As a new mother in France, I'm here to argue that he's wrong. Neither candidate represents *actual* European-style socialism. And it's a damned shame they don't. The women of America would have a much better shot at having it all if they did.

Thanks to Anne-Marie Slaughter's excellent article in the *Atlantic*, everyone's talking once again about the continuing difficulties American mothers face juggling work and family. I just took my 10-month-old daughter on her first trip to the United States, and while we were there, I heard a lot from friends and family—most of whom also have young children—about what I'm referring to as The Child Care Question: Can a double-income couple make enough money to pay for full-time child care? Or would it be, bizarrely, a wise economic move for one of them to quit his or her job and become a stay-at-home parent?

But since my husband and I moved to France two years ago, this child care question isn't one that we've had to think about. Why? Because of three very progressive child care policies instituted by the French government. In brief, the French government provides: 1) inexpensive municipal day care, 2) tax breaks for families employing in-home child care workers, and 3) universal free preschool beginning at age 3. Together, these make quality child care so affordable—even in expensive Paris—that we're actually considering extending my husband's work contract and staying in France until our daughter is school-age just to take advantage of them. While I don't see the United States turning into France anytime soon (certainly not with Paul Ryan's budget), these ideas merit serious discussion. Even instituting one of them would revolutionize the lives of middle-class U.S. families.

Though many of these policies were put in place to combat France's falling birthrate, they have had the added benefit of getting mothers back into the workforce. After a period of paying women to stay home with their children, the French government realized that many women wanted to return to work but needed child care solutions to make this possible. This is where the government has focused its efforts, and to mostly positive results. Over 80 percent of French women work, as opposed to just under 60 percent in the United States. Though employment declines in both countries for women as they have children, in France it's still over 80 percent for women with one child and impressively over 50 percent for women with three or more children.

Women who work full time often enroll their children in government-run day care called a *crèche*, which will take children beginning at 3 months old. Most *crèches* are open the length of the workday, from 7:30 a.m. to 7 or 8 p.m. The hourly rate is on a sliding scale based on income level, from a high of 4.20 euros an hour to 0.26 euros an hour for the poorest families. Because the *crèches* are overseen by the government, they adhere to high government standards: At least 50 percent of *crèche* workers are required to have a specialized diploma in early child care and education, and a pediatrician and a child psychologist are on staff or on call at each *crèche*.

Crèches do get oversubscribed, and some families may not want to put their children in full-time care. To add more flexibility, in 2004 the French government instituted a system of tax breaks that would aid families in hiring a nanny of their choice, either an *assistante maternelle*, who is licensed and overseen by the government, or a regular child care worker. As long as the nanny is legally allowed to work in France and the family declares and pays her benefits, the state helps out with a monthly rebate based on family income level. These rebates often amount to about one-third the total cost of care.

Finally, France has an excellent universal preschool system, the *ecole maternelle*, where children are guaranteed a place from age 3 to 6. It runs from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. four days a week, and many *maternelles* offer a day care service after the school day ends. Here, kids learn all the important “soft skills” preschool provides as well as, in the final year, reading, writing, and basic math—preparing them for entry into the French primary school system. *Maternelle* is not mandatory—children aren’t legally required to attend school in France until age 6, much like the United States—but because they are high quality and essentially free, more than 95 percent of eligible French children are enrolled.

So how does all this work in practice? Here’s my story. My daughter was born in November 2011: my first child and my first experience navigating any child care system. Because I work as a writer and a consultant, I’m able to have some flexibility in my schedule, but I also absolutely had to start working again when Sophia was 2 months old. After about a month of searching, I was able to establish a nanny share with another mother for 15 hours a week. We paid our nanny 11 euros an hour, and on top of this, we paid into her health, pension, unemployment, and vacation. The total gross cost to me per month: around 450 euros. However, because we declared her and paid her social charges, I received a monthly rebate from the government for about 270 euros—the amount is based on our family salary. My net cost was a very affordable 180 euros (\$234) per month for 60 hours of childcare.

This fall, Sophia’s care changed. We did not get a spot in the *crèche*—priority is given to families where both parents work full time—but she did get into a *halte-garderie*, or part-time *crèche*, that takes care of her three afternoons a week. I also have a part-time nanny share for about 25 hours a week. Total number of hours of child care per week: 40. Total cost to me after the rebate: 440 euros (\$572) per month, or about 5,280 euros (\$6,686) a year, plus an additional tax break on top of this.

An equivalent amount of care in a major city in the United States would cost between \$800 and \$2,000 per month—there’s a lot of variety depending on your state, but it would certainly not be the same price or cheaper as in France. And it doesn’t get easier once your

child reaches preschool age—in most states, preschool costs are more than tuition at the state university.

My husband and I currently make about 60,000 euros a year before taxes, or the equivalent of about \$85,000—not too bad and well over the U.S. median household income (\$51,900 in 2010), but not enough to handle child care in the United States without making some difficult choices. These are choices familiar to many young families striving for both professional success and work-family balance. Would one of us have to stay home rather than pay our full salary toward a nanny? Would we move to a city where our parents live, regardless of the job opportunities there, so that we could have their help with child care? Would one of us need to take a “money” job, if we could find one, that we didn’t love in order to afford care for our kids? Here, because care is so affordable, we don’t need to answer any of these questions.

In researching this article, I spoke to many of my friends all over the United States in similar situations, all with one or two children, all with both parents working. All but one—a pair of married engineers who could afford a \$2,000-a-month nanny—were dissatisfied with their child care options. No one declared their nanny or paid her benefits—sometimes at the nanny’s request. According to the 2011 Park Slope Parents Nanny Survey, only 15 percent of families paid their nannies completely on the books; the United States does not make it easy or affordable for most families to do this. In France, I wouldn’t say it’s easy—there are still major immigration issues here—but it is definitely affordable to declare your child’s nanny. Because of government rebates, it can actually be *less* expensive to hire a declared worker and pay her benefits than to pay her under the table. And I *like* being able to do this; I like knowing that the person who cares for my child will have health care and paid vacation time. I like that the system here treats child care like a real job and makes it easy and possible for employers to do right by their caregivers. This kind of incentivized legality seems like a policy even Republicans could get behind.

My husband and I now joke that we’re trapped by socialism—once those Europeans get hold of you, with their high taxes and affordable health care and child care, it’s hard to break free. It’s certainly hard for us to imagine returning to the United States on our current salaries. But though we make less money and pay more taxes in France, we haven’t felt the hit as hard—in fact, with health care, child care, and education so affordable, our money seems to go further. Maybe a little socialism would give American women a better shot at having it all.



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