

In Our Hands The Struggle for U.S. Child Care Policy

Elizabeth Palley and Corey S Shdaimah
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REVIEWED BY KATIE B. GARNER

In the volume, *In Our Hands: The Struggle for U.S. Child Care Policy*, Palley and Shdaimah methodically explore the political, legislative, and historical reasons why child care policies in the U.S. remain scant in comparison to other developed nations, focusing largely on the period surrounding the last major push for child care reform (during the Nixon Administration), until 2014 (the year of publication). For those familiar with the options in more progressive nation-states, questions arise regarding the U.S.'s reticence to adopt more family-friendly policies. Palley and Shdaimah address how differences in political landscapes permitted more progressive childcare policies to take shape in Scandinavian countries as well as through much of the European Union, United Kingdom, and Canada. While modest gains have been achieved in the U.S. through the Family Medical Leave Act, government funding and/or policy reform have not materialized in any substantial way during this time period, with one interesting exception: the U.S. military.

According to the authors, U.S. families frequently pay for care that is beyond their financial means, rely on substandard care, or cope with the difficulties of one parent—often the mother—opting out of paid labor altogether, at least temporarily. Palley and Shdaimah pull from multiple fields, focusing largely but far from exclusively, on politics and law for the majority of the text in order to identify the most glaring issues that prevent cohesive, universal childcare policies. Highlighting the lack of grassroots, co-ordinated advocacy, the authors argue that little will be accomplished without the political will from more voters.

Palley and Shdaimah accurately posit that many middle-class Americans hold negative attitudes regarding subsidized childcare, viewing it as substandard and primarily intended for lower-income families. They also suggest that child care may not actually be a pressing problem for as many active voters as one might imagine since many parents of older children turn away from child care concerns and those who have not yet had children remain unaware of the challenges they will face. The authors reference the Republican/Democrat divide, highlighting conservative voters' concerns alongside the lack of organized effort to resist childcare reform.

While the aforementioned subjects are certainly handled adeptly, *In Our*

Hands is most successful in its endeavor to ascertain more nuanced reasons for the lack of political will as well as the delay in securing reform that would directly benefit many U.S. families, particularly those already struggling financially. Two of the authors' more astute observations involve the challenges of successfully bringing together non-profits already working to secure more robust childcare support as well as the importance of framing issues appropriately. In the book's latter chapters, which interweave interviews with women on the front lines of non-profit organizations' efforts to secure better care options, Palley and Shdaimah offer careful but pointed criticism to the ways in which many perpetually underfunded non-profits are at cross purposes in their efforts and may actually hamper the overall goal of unified message building and framing as they attempt to maintain their own standing and financial backing.

Framing is a theme that the authors return to throughout *In Our Hands*, and Palley and Shdaimah are convincing in their argument that how an issue is packaged and disseminated is one of the more important aspects of securing progressive change. For example, policies that have been passed, such as Head Start, obtained support through successful framing, namely the importance of education and long-term gains that could lead to lower overall financial commitment for at-risk children. They argue similar work must be done in order to institute care policies for ages birth through three, noting that **how** a problem is defined shapes what policy ultimately gets passed.

Palley and Shdaimah's success in synthesizing hundreds of sources is to be commended and they provide useful, current analyses of problems, and more importantly, offer solutions that could ultimately help working families, the economy, and children. While *In Our Hands* offers deep research and astute examination, its tight focus on U.S. childcare policy may mean that many of its readers will already be personally or professionally aligned with the subject matter. Regardless, one would be hard-pressed to find a more thorough, well-cited, and well-organized book on what remains an under-analyzed topic and for that reason it is a book that academic as well as public libraries should add to their collections. (Texts that examine the cultural issues that impact this topic would be beneficial companions as this area of analysis remains outside the scope of *In Our Hands*.)

Finally, while published in 2014, it is important to keep in mind that *In Our Hands* was released before Trump took office. Palley and Shdaimah suggest that we may not be ready for a childcare revolution; however, large-scale organizing and the concept of being "woke" are gaining momentum in ways that would have been unexpected two years ago. Let's hope that some of the effort toward reform will be given to the needs of families with young children.