

The Grannie Trap

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Bridie Jabour reports in *The Guardian Australia* (18 June 2014):

Fifteen hours a week of government-funded pre-school for every Australian child is at risk, as states accuse the federal government of dragging out negotiations over the national partnership. The National Partnership Agreement for Universal Access to Early Childhood Education is due to expire at the end of this year and states are getting agitated as the federal government delays negotiations while waiting for the results of a Deloitte Access review into it. But the government has denied they are dragging it out saying the states did not hand over information for the review when asked.

Help! Here I am, a woman in my mid-70's with marbles reasonably intact, but somewhat declining physical energy. I am a product of the women's liberation generation: I left school at 16 and worked as a typist until I married, then took time off to have my two sons before taking advantage of Gough Whitlam's encouragement to acquire a degree (free - I would never have asked my husband to fund me). So I grabbed the opportunity and completed a Bachelor of Education at the then Canberra College of Advanced Education (CCAЕ). I was a 'New Australian', a previously peripatetic Pom, who found herself in a hotbed of new-found Australian nationalism (Australian politics and literature were new subjects in the tertiary curriculum). Not only this, the CCAЕ was also a hotbed of women's liberation. My consciousness was forcibly raised about the inherent loneliness of being stay-at-home mother in a society made mobile by a changing job market. Domestic isolation made friends hard to find, apart from through the College.

Then we moved to Brisbane, my husband following job opportunities (our fifth move since we married). Teachers who had not trained in Queensland were at the bottom of the State education department's hiring list, so I combined the teaching degree with shorthand and typing and taught for five years (in a business course that offered a new type of qualification, an Associate Diploma in Administrative Studies), a job that fitted the rhythm of terms and vacations. Teaching could be prepared at home, and marking completed each evening. At the same time, I completed a doctorate through the University of Queensland, focussing on education policymaking in Queensland. After submitting the doctorate I embarked on a rewarding 20-year career in the public service, starting in the Queensland Education Department under the Bjelke-Petersen regime, through a range of central agencies, and finishing as Director of the Office of the Commissioner, Queensland Police Service, from which I retired in 2004. I looked forward to future freedoms - particularly the opportunity to decide how I would spend my time.

Over this time, to my great pleasure, I was acquiring grandchildren, ranging now ranging in age from 22 down to 1. As a result of breeding and blending I now have nine wonderful grandchildren, seven of whom live in Brisbane. Before I continue my tale I have to emphasise that this really has been a great pleasure, and I have delighted in my expanding family. But it has also made me aware, particularly through talking to my contemporaries, of a significant, silent potential problem in the community. Like these contemporaries, I feel a slight guilt at even raising this as a problem, but it is an issued that needs to be faced.

Many women of my age joined the workforce young, educated themselves upwards and worked hard, juggling work with family commitments (in my case with no grandmothers near). Women these days generally choose to have children, but women have no choice about having grandchildren.

Not only do modern, post-liberation movement women choose to have children, but they are choosing to have them later to have time to build careers, and take for granted their right to a career. More often than not there is also a strong economic imperative to be in the paid workforce. However the effect of all this is that there is an army of grannies out there who fought for women's liberation only to find themselves unliberated by their retirement, and who are considerably 'advanced in years'. They may have 'liberated' themselves to pursue careers (often under quite difficult circumstances), but find this 'retirement' dominated by child-minding.

For me, this is not much of a concern. I can afford occasional domestic help, to take my grandchildren on outings, I have had a rewarding post-retirement working life, writing books and being academically engaged. Also I have learned to say 'no' if I feel child-minding is encroaching too heavily on my time or my diminishing energy level. But there are many grannies who I know are trapped by their children's expectations of them; demands they cannot refuse, largely because of the expense or scarcity of child care centres.

Shortage of childcare centres is certainly exacerbating the problem locally. But I feel that any debate over childcare should overtly recognise the army of exhausted grannies who are propping up the women currently in the paid workforce. We love our grandchildren, but we, too, appreciate a bit of choice about how we spend our time and dwindling energies.

I remember in the dim distant women's lib past someone saying to me that for every liberated woman there was an unliberated grandmother. I did not have access to grandmotherly help during my working life so it meant little to me. Now, I see what she meant.