

# The Sylvans

## Detailed summary powered by AI

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*Motion: Universal free childcare would provide the greatest boost to equality for women.*

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### Transcript:

The motion is that universal free childcare would provide the greatest boost to equality for women. Proposing that would be the first speaker and opposing is the second speaker, so they have up to 15 minutes to go. I will now turn over to the proposer.

It's always nice to get a sense of where the room sits on this one. So, one number that I want us to focus on first is 2158. That is 132 years from now, and effectively, that is how long it will take, by estimate, to get gender parity—for women and men to be considered equal on earnings, opportunity etc. That's 132 years from now; none of us will be here on something actually, systemically, we can make big differences on today. Instead, my LinkedIn feed this week will be full of celebrating women. Let's get more women into leadership. Yes, that's great. What is it actually going to do in reality? Because it hasn't shifted anything in all the time that International Women's Day has been running, and I'm not the only woman who's completely disengaging with that kind of nonsense because it doesn't address the systemic issues that are causing that gender inequality.

The single biggest cause and driver in countries like the UK is the fact that there's a motherhood penalty, and there's a very simple way to break it down. So, women earn on average 43% less than men. 75% of women report pregnancy discrimination. The pay gap is actually very small under 30; it widens and gets bigger when women are over 40. There are significant barriers in helping women access the same opportunities and work, and the childcare burden typically falls more on women than it does on men. Now, yes, okay, we'll say great, we've got free childcare in the UK, you know, 30 hours. What does it actually mean? So, full-time nursery for under-twos costs between 12,000 and 14,000 pounds a year. The costs have increased up to 80% since 2010. Peak maternal employment drops, and it aligns with childcare; for moderate earners, you barely gain enough to work.

Now let's break down what does it actually mean? What does that free childcare actually mean? The funded hours are term time only. That's 38 weeks of the year. I don't know if you know—I need to spell it out—but nobody gets that much holiday. It's not guaranteed full daycare, so it's 30 hours. If you think about a working week where you're factoring in commute and travel costs, you're not going to cover full-time hours on that, and it's not universally available. The nurseries can choose; they can choose to put conditions onto it. So I just want to frame that as the core reason why I think this is a really important debate. Because when we talk about trying to reach gender equality, I find it actually staggering that we ignore one of the biggest causes and drivers of it when we're having these discussions and talking about these subjects, which is going to happen more this week as we have the run-up to International Women's Day.

But the one thing I want to really, really stress is that this debate is about the fact that universal free childcare will make a big contribution to that gender equality. I am not saying we should be debating whether mothers choose to be at home with their kids, whether they make that choice that they want to do that. This is effectively giving opportunity for women to actually do something that's not possible at the moment because of cost barriers because that still means that there are still care needs that are not being factored into the current system. And I want to just really differentiate that nuance, because I believe something like universal free childcare will have a bigger impact than anything else that International Women's Day has done today, and we are not addressing it.

So let me just break down what the motherhood penalty is and just share a bit of facts. When we start out our careers, there actually is very little difference between what men and women earn. The gender wage gap actually widens the year after the first child is born. So, 12 years after the first birth, mothers earn 33% less than fathers. 24% of women actually exit the workforce in the first 12 months of having a child; fathers do not actually experience the same penalty on parenthood that mothers do. So women are also shown to be less likely to be promoted to the first step of management for many reasons, and I'll break that down further in a moment.

Why I think universal childcare would help is because if you're able to increase the maternal labour supply, you are going to have a significant difference in the opportunities that will compound for women over time. Because the gender inequality that happens in the workforce causes a significant gender pay gap, and it also causes a significant wealth gap. Women have hugely less pensions than men do as a result of the gap in working time and their choice to even work part-time or having to work part-time because of childcare needs.

Some of the key findings have also found that because there's bias that exists—that people understand that typically women would be doing more of the care, would be the one the school phones when the child is sick to go pick them up—there has been research to show that they have biases when it comes to hiring processes. So whether that's legal or not, we know it happens in practice. So when they've done research on blind CV screening, they have found that without any clear difference in skill sets and experience, mothers are much less likely to be hired for senior roles because of the expectation to commit beyond working hours in some senior positions as well. 36% of women work part-time, and part of the reason for that is what I shared earlier: because of things like school pick-up time, the fact that they want to be at home at times, and also a lot more of the care burden falls on them.

The other factor is the compounding impact of loss of time and work. So experience is also a big driver of promotion into senior roles, and when women take time out of work through choice or through cost, they do give up some of that experience that's gained in that time and, as a result, are considered less skilled or less capable for senior roles than men are. There's also significant research to show that 48% of single-parent households are living in poverty, and 86% of single-parent households are women. So if you think about what job would you get that you would have flexibility for term time, you would have flexibility to have part-time hours—that will often fall into roles that either are working in schools because that fits in with the term times, or it would be flexible work or gig work where the hours are more... you don't have to commit to those times, so the holiday issue doesn't impact it so much, but it then means lower pay, less security and less benefits attached to it.

The other thing that I want to bring up is that it's not just up to school age. The challenge in school—that's also a challenge because of after-school clubs and the cost of those. So per annum, just generally, it's about 3,600 pounds a year for parents to pay for after-school costs. And the other factor is then in school holidays; if your work or employment doesn't allow those sorts of hours, how do people actually cope with those changes in time?

I want to share a story that actually really hit me quite hard, and it's the reason why I really care about this. So, I am part of a Rotary Club, and one of the things we did every Christmas was deliver Christmas food hampers and gifts to our low-income families in my area. And I will never forget the day that I knocked on a door with a very, very young boy refusing to open the door—rightly—because his mum wasn't home. It was school holidays just before Christmas in a single-family household. That boy was very young. Now, what could she have done if she needed to work? What are we actually causing as a result of not giving people like her access to proper childcare to help her when she is not able to be home? That is what's happening because it's unaffordable. It is not actually done in a way that... it sounds great, "30 hours free childcare," but that is not the reality. That is not what my friends experience. They have to take some of the free hours part of the day and have a massive gap in the middle. It doesn't actually cover a full year. So it sounds great in principle, and it sounds like we're doing something about the problem, but the reality is we're not.

So if we can make one really significant change that will improve women's choices in the workforce, it is universal free childcare. And I want to really stress choice, because I do know, having spoken to a lot of my friends about this topic pre-debating, it is about choice. It is about some women wanting to be home to look after their children. But on the other hand, if it's so crippling that when you do the numbers it actually doesn't make sense to, then you have to think there's something wrong with the system. And if we don't start addressing systemic issues causing gender inequality, we are going to go 130 years and still talk about this. I would love to stand here and say that before I die, we actually made a difference to this. I doubt it, because I have to sit in rooms where people tell me that if I try and push myself and talk to people and "give to gain," I am going to make life better for women in the workforce. I think that's rubbish. The core driver is very clear. Research states that it is because there's a motherhood penalty. So let's address that, rather than telling women they need to step up and be leaders.

Moderator: Thank you, the proposer. The opposer.

The opposer: I want to first apologise; I've had a cold recently. And I'd also like to say thank you for the speech. It's so wonderful that we're able to debate and talk about women's equality

coming from a similar sort of hymn sheet. So thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak. I'm opposing the motion tonight because universal free childcare, while valuable, is just one of many levers society needs to pull if we're serious about equality for women. It's important and vital, even, but what we really need is a greater attitudinal shift.

Women's equality is often presented as some kind of economic equation; solve that problem of what to do about looking after children and the job is done. But that narrative ignores a number of critical realities. Firstly, it assumes that childcare is the central barrier to equality. Yet by the end of their working age span, around 20% of women have never had children, many by choice, and yet they still face discrimination, pay gaps and managed opportunities purely because of their gender. Second, it assumes that women who choose to take time out to look after their children somehow make the wrong choice. If we're serious about equality, we have to respect that choice rather than imply that it's a problem to be solved.

More importantly, the motion reduces a complex social issue to an economic fix. Sexism is routine. Childcare matters, but it doesn't address the cultural, institutional and everyday biases that shape women's lives long before and long after motherhood. The inequality starts far earlier and runs far deeper for women than the motion implies. I was shocked to learn that almost half of girls and women between the ages of seven and 21 say they feel unsafe because of sexism. And if you look at our Parliament, only a third of the seats are occupied by women. And when women do reach the highest offices, they're dismissed, undermined or critiqued for their appearance as a matter of routine. Without proper representation, it's hard to argue that women's interests are properly considered when making the laws that can make change happen.

Even in television programmes, this drip-drip effect persists. If you watch *The Apprentice*, you'll see the subliminal message that women must be colourful, glossy and decorative. This cultural cue shapes expectations long before childcare becomes relevant. Even now in 2026, we're talking about the Women's World Cup, because gender norms mean that football is predominantly considered to be a man's sport. We actually need an adjective to make clear that women can play sport too. Inequality is everywhere: pay, safety, leadership, sport and opportunity. My argument is not that universal free childcare isn't important. It is. My argument is that even in 2026, it is merely the tip of the iceberg. Women need far more than childcare to thrive on equal terms with men.

I've often heard about the Nordic countries being the gold standard when it comes to free childcare and equality. So let's look closer at that, because free childcare is not the magic bullet. Using Finland as an example—Finland is second in the world equalities index—their system includes not just free childcare but also cash-for-care payments that encourage mothers to stay home for longer. Finnish researchers say themselves that this creates inequality between families and reinforces gendered divisions of labour. And despite decades of generous childcare, Finland still struggles with the same pattern we see here in the UK: the lower-paid partner, usually the woman, ends up doing more at home, limiting career progression. So Finland doesn't prove that free childcare creates equality. It proves that childcare alone is not enough. Equality in those countries, the Nordics, comes from other sources: long parental leave, individual taxation and labour protections, to name a few.

And I want to be really, really clear: many women will choose to stay at home with their children, or reduce their hours, or choose a career which helps caring for them, and that is 100% fine. I

know many fantastic women who are wonderful role models who stayed at home, but we need to be really honest about what that choice looks like. Most women aren't staying at home because they freely choose to. They're choosing within a system that pushes them in one direction. Universal childcare doesn't change the fact that many women are still pushed, nudged or economically funnelled into being the one who steps back.

An example closer to home is the UK Parliament. As I said earlier, in 2026 just one-third of our MPs are women. The issue isn't the cost of childcare. The working hours are completely incompatible with standard childcare, even if it was free. Parliament routinely sits until 10 o'clock at night. No nursery in the country would cover those hours. Women MPs repeatedly report being judged for caring responsibilities in ways that men are not and still report being the default parent for schools or bringing their children to work in an emergency. If even the women who make the laws face these assumptions, then universal free childcare isn't going to give women's equality a significant boost.

Women pay a price for sacrifice, labelled a risk for commitment. Let's take a look at Mary Barra, the CEO of General Motors, one of the most powerful women in global business. She spoke about how women's so-called choices are shaped by workplace cultures that assume the mother will be the one to step back. She says women don't choose different careers because they lack ambition, but because the system is built around male working patterns. If a woman at the top of a multinational company still faces those assumptions, universal free childcare alone is not going to fix the problem for us.

I maintain that giving universal free childcare is a move in the right direction for women's equality, but that even if that was put in place tomorrow, women would still be faced with restrictions that men would not. Let's look at the women who don't have children, who escape the motherhood penalty. If childcare is the key to inequality, then they should be sailing through the system, but they aren't. They still face the pay gap, the promotion gap, the assumptions about commitment and the comments about their appearance. And while it's illegal, some employers do hold back opportunities because they assume a woman might one day have a child in the future. That isn't a problem with childcare; it's a problem with attitude.

I've lost count of the number of times that my daughter's nursery or schools have called me to sort out a problem. We're a two-parent family, and I can say this because he isn't here: my husband is just as competent as I am, usually more able to work in an emergency. Although I've explained this repeatedly, the assumption still persists that the mother is the primary carer and the one who can drop everything. Now, of course, my daughter will always be my first priority, but taking calls and leaving meetings and constantly being the default parent does have consequences in a workplace where women already face bias. Being the one who is always interrupted or always rushing out the door creates a reputation for being less committed or being less reliable. And this isn't just my experience. Every woman I've spoken to tells a similar story; childcare will not fix that. What we need is an attitudinal shift about who is responsible for children.

Even if we assume childcare is the main barrier to women's careers, universal provision creates a structural mismatch between childcare hours and the demands of many professions. Many nurseries open roughly between eight o'clock and seven o'clock at night. And school nurseries are even more limited: 8:30 to 3:30, term time only. So what happens if a woman wants to be a heart surgeon? Heart attacks don't stop at seven o'clock or during school holidays. Only around

15% of consultant cardiologists are women, compared with about 60% of GPs, which have, generally speaking, a more standard working pattern. Or take shift work like policing: only around a third of police officers are women anyway, and fewer than 12% hold senior roles. Unless nurseries operate 24/7, the types of jobs and the levels of seniority available to women will be constrained. The alternative might be a nanny, but good luck finding one. Nannies are typically low paid, the work is demanding, and evening and irregular hours make recruitment even harder. Making this state-funded won't magically create a workforce willing to do it either. I don't pretend to have a full solution, but I do know it won't come from childcare alone. In my own family, our roles were a little reversed when it came to our daughter while she was still little. I tended to handle the finances and the practicalities while my husband did most of the pickups and drop-offs. My career mattered more to me, and he supported that. He got his reward for plenty of chap trips to watch Queen's Park Rangers lose in the championship. I mention this because the real solution lies in broader social change: men stepping forward, men taking responsibility for childcare and men seeing roles like early years as valuable, skilled work. Without that cultural shift, universal free childcare, helpful though it is, cannot deliver true equality for women.

Universal free childcare removes a cost barrier, but it does not remove the cultural and institutional barriers that actually hold women back. It is that which would provide us with the biggest boost. The point I'm trying to make overall here is that while universal free childcare would be a boost, it would not be the most significant one, because sexism is so endemic in our society that many people of both genders simply don't see it. Our society is built on it. Can you put your hands up, perhaps, if you can tell me what colour Theresa May's shoes are? But I bet you hear the stories in the press about Theresa May's leopard print kitten heels. No one counts the number of times Nigel Farage wears that pink tie in Parliament—when he does go—but people did count the number of times Liz Truss wore the same necklace. There are newspaper articles about it. Can you tell me, perhaps, about David Cameron's choice of briefcase? No. But Margaret Thatcher's handbag became so famous that it became part of her political identity. Women are told to avoid walking alone at night. Their clothing is still brought up in rape defence cases in court. Women doctors are mistaken for nurses more frequently than men are. Men are often praised for being hands-on when they do the school pick-up, while a woman is merely fulfilling expectations. People say that men "help" with the housework and childcare, implying that the work belongs to women by default. And while I wouldn't encourage anyone to swear, because certainly I never have, research on profanity consistently finds there's a disproportionate share of the most offensive swear words refer to women's bodies. So even profanity is heavily skewed towards degrading women.

I am a big fan of men. They're great, and I certainly don't think that all men are sexist. They're not. I'm simply saying that equality for women is a long way off, and it's not going to be solved by a cash boost for looking after children. Universal free childcare would undoubtedly help women. It would remove a cost barrier, support families and offer more opportunities, making life easier for millions. But the motion tonight asks whether it will provide the greatest boost to equality for women, and I don't think that the evidence supports that claim. The truth is that the biggest barrier to women is not a financial one. It's a cultural one. It is built on a society that makes assumptions, has expectations and structures that shape women's lives and choices, irrespective of whether they have children. They are the attitudes that tell women to be

decorative, that they are the default parent or an emotional manager. It's the institutions that still operate on the assumption that you shouldn't have any caring responsibilities or that life never interrupts. Universal free childcare can help women participate more fully in the workforce, but it cannot change the fact that they are still judged through a gendered lens. If we want genuine equality for women, we need to change the culture that shapes women's choices, and that's way more fundamental than providing free childcare. It could apply to the whole family, after all, and not just women. Childcare is not the root of equality. It is the root of a much bigger tree. Universal free childcare is a good policy if the country can afford it, but it is not the greatest boost to equality. The greatest boost will come when women are judged as equal to men at home, at work, in our politics and in our culture.

Moderator: Thank you, the opposer. We've had two excellent speeches with very different perspectives. We have a clash here, which is excellent, and we like that, and hopefully, we can elucidate things as we go through the rest of the night. We will now turn to the floor speeches. As for volunteers, in a second. Briefly on the floor speeches, they are up to five minutes. You've been seeing me flashing blue cards; when you have two minutes remaining, you'll get a two-minute card and then a finished card when your time is up, and I need you to finish then because we have a lot of people. During the floor speeches, if you want to ask a question of the speaker, you can raise your hand. The speaker can recognise you. If they don't recognise you, then you just need to not ask the question because the speaker has the floor. But if they take the question, you can ask a short question, not a long statement, please. So with that, would anyone like to come up and follow the main speakers? Yes, your name again is the speaker.

The speaker: All right. Thank you. This is going to be a really tough act to follow because I'm well aware that I'm a man, and it's kind of... I might have biased thoughts towards this, and is it really my place to talk about this to some extent? But I'll give it my best and apologies for everything I get wrong, which will be plenty, but we have to go. So one of the thoughts I thought was interesting... I'm actually for having, in the same way that I'm for universal healthcare, I'm also for universal childcare. I kind of think those two things are linked in the same way that anything that helps society grow—such as universal education, universal fire department, police department—are kind of more together because when it comes to childcare, actually guaranteeing a basic set of a good upbringing, whether or not the parents can actually provide that or not, is essential for a child to develop. And just because someone isn't able to give minimum standards to their child because either they're overworked, there are no parents or for many reasons, I don't see this as also just a woman problem. This is actually about making sure that all children actually have universal childcare, have a good upbringing, get the education that they need, and from the tax point of view in the adult [life], they're much more likely to be able to contribute back into the system rather than actually falling through the gap. So I'm also seeing this from kind of like the child's perspective.

One of the comments that you rightly made was in Scandinavian countries such as Finland, actually, the gender pay [gap] is a bit wider than it is in England, despite having childcare in Finland. And I would say that linking this conversation too much to kind of the pay gap is really narrowing this discussion at some point. In the same way that when I look at the extremes, you could argue that it's far more men that are in jail. You're much more likely as a man to be a psychopath, because to be a CEO of a company, I think you have to be a bit of a psychopath. You have to basically avoid your family, pretend they don't exist, and just put business first. So

when you're looking at those extremes, that's why these kind of like extremes have happened. And you could argue in some cases, Scandinavian countries... What we're arguing about isn't about making everyone assume that there's no difference between genders and that everyone's the same. What we're arguing about is giving people the choice about how they want to live their life. In different countries, their genders will, sometimes, in some cases, choose a much happier and healthier life. Myself, like, if I wanted to, I could just focus on my career, and along with that, I could be quite unhappy. But in another way, if I stepped away from my career a bit and did a bit more part-time work, I'd be happier. But then that is nothing to do with the actual gender pay gap. That's to do with my own personal view on how I want to live my life. So I think when we're talking about the conversation about whether universal childcare is going to help equality, I think what it's going to do more is actually allow, in the case of this point, allow women to make better choices about what they do in their lives. Because we are in a broad society where we are leaning so much heavier towards unfair expectations of how women should exist in society. Women aren't treated the same as men, and they have very unfair social expectations compared to how a male is. We can't fix all these overnight, and can't fix all of them at all, really. But the idea of actually at least creating choice and making sure that people have a basic right to childcare is going to help both the male and the female when it comes to looking after their children.

Moderator: Thank you, the previous speaker. Yes. Your name, please. The speaker.

The speaker: Coming here, I thought that I'm going to take the position of pro this statement about, you know, universal childcare. But sitting with the statement a little longer, I believe that I stand with the opposition in the sense that this is not the end-all, fix-all we hope it would be. I think the suggestion that the greatest inequality between women and men is around motherhood... I don't know if it's correct. I don't know how to break down these huge topics of inequality between genders into financial ideas. I'm not going to be a parent. I often have nightmares about finding myself pregnant. The statement that this would be the greatest resolve to inequality between men and women suggests that once this is done, all the things that I'm experiencing and all the things that other childless women are experiencing will be gone or not as big as an issue anymore. Narrowing the issue of motherhood and parenthood into a financial issue also feels a little bit reductive to me. Personally, my issues are not about motherhood. They are around my safety, my image, the way society sees me and the way my trans sisters... their existence is debated.

I am not saying that universal childcare is not essential. It is. I just wonder if we should move towards coupling support to parents from support to mothers. The idea that this is somehow a feminist issue, but the idea that this is somehow a women's issue, ignores all the men who are primary child carers. It ignores all the same-sex couples. It ignores all the couples who are choosing to live life together without children. It turns a financial issue into a women's issue, and the equality between men and women into something that is revolving around the existence of women as parents, which also is part of the reduction of women's place in society. I am, like I said, not going to be a mother. I'm not planning to be a mother. My issues with the patriarchy will be here long after issues around motherhood are still around, and I think that what I'm trying to say is that narrowing the existence of women into motherhood and their ability to procreate is uncomfortable to me, because it sits to me in the same sort of ideological space as, I don't

know, Reform wanting to tax women for not having children. It's a real thing. They said it. Yeah, a real thing. We live in that time. Yeah, that's all I wanted to say.

Moderator: Thank you, the previous speaker. Yes, your name, please. The speaker.

The speaker: We found it interesting that the previous speaker said about framing it in an economic perspective to be reductive, because that's exactly what we did. We framed it in an economic perspective, and we think to highlight the inequalities in perspectives... We're from the male view. Our opinion lies with the proposition. We admire the logic of the opposition, and we think that it's the first lever of bringing more equality for women. We think that free childcare should be campaigned around as an essential issue, just to highlight the strides that are made in reducing income inequality. Highlighting that women are important should be a given, but also making meaningful steps to make women equal in society is important. We think that universal childcare is particularly important because... Why are men able to have babies? They would be paid for enhancing... We think that the loss of time in work would be compensated if they were men. And yeah, there would be so many provisions in terms of the provisions of summer camps to educate children and ensure that they receive the best education, alongside, obviously, family environments. We think that having long-term childcare provided by the state would enhance equality because we provide the firm foundation in which children can build their lives and choose where they want to go in life, and that would stabilise the issues that we have around finances and stuff like that. And then, yeah, we think that obviously women, some women, are more maternal than other women, and also like the science argument. But we think science should run alongside the economic argument: that children are sort of seen as a time penalty, and it should be seen as an offset benefit towards GDP for the future contributions that women make in the workforce. So, yeah, we think that if women did not have children, the economic cost would be a lot greater. And if we had a system that prioritises people over the economy—though we framed it in an economic way—but if you had a system that prioritised people in that way, then the slow shift, like the implementation of the motion, would be good beneficiary steps in the right direction. Thank you.

Moderator: Thank you, the previous speaker. Anyone else like to come up? The speaker, take the next speaker after.

The speaker: I'll stand on this side because I understand the proposer's position; that's where I initially was inclined to go. Everybody standing over there, which kind of weighed over. But the motion is "universal free childcare would provide the greatest boost to equality for women." The greatest boost. I'm not sure that universal free childcare will provide the greatest boost for equality. I'm almost tempted to say we need data on that. I'm almost tempted to say... and this links to the opposer's point of view about attitudes. If the motion was "universal free childcare for stay-at-home dads would provide the greatest boost to equality for women," wouldn't that work better? Because then you've got the acceptance of men being stay-at-home dads, that would probably go up. You'll probably have more men wanting to stay at home, and then that would also encourage women to be a part of the workforce. So isn't that... I'm just trying to get at the subconscious biases we have between the genders. So I think the motion maybe let itself down. The opposer has said, or suggested, that it's up to men to be more... what was the phrasing that was used? "Women are judged equally." Fair enough for that, but there's a sense that it's men's fault, which I'm... you know, I think it's both men and women are responsible for our attitudes. And we've all been on dates, and we all know what the gender difference is on a date, where I

know on my date, I'm expected to pay for the first date. So you've got gender differences and attitudes being established very early on. You know, I'm the one that's expected to take her to romantic locations around the world. I'm the one that has to buy 60-pound scented candles. I'm the one that has to be an active listener. I'm the one that has to apologise, even though I don't know what I'm apologising for. So, I think that, you know, we've all been on the dating apps, and it's very Darwinian, and the gender differences are established there. So if we want equality attitudes, it's not just up to men. It's not just the patriarchy. You know? It's also up to women to take some responsibility for equality.

Okay? There's obviously a benefit. Childcare is obviously a huge issue. I mean, anybody who's had kids, you know, it's a huge cost. And if you're lower down on the socio-economic ladder, one of you has to choose to stay at home. So it is inhibited. And universal free—in other words, the government provides the cost of childcare—would help. That would reduce a lot of stress. Obviously, the health of kids would improve. Generally, I'm sure the data will say that. And then also, we're not reproducing enough, so that in itself will solve a lot of problems. But then you're going to have the cost thing, right? Well, how are we going to fund it? But, you know what? When the government needs 100 billion for something—you know, for example, when the banks went down—you can find the money. You probably have to just, you know, square it with the bond market and say, "Don't raise our interest rates too much." I'm sure we can find it. It would create a political division, right? Because the conservatives want austerity, you know, the left—they call us for left, right? We want social equality. We want social services. You know, equality; there would be a sort of political war thing there.

And then also, what hasn't been discussed is who will take care of the kids. It used to be that the lower classes took care of the kids. So, you know, if you're at the upper class, it didn't really matter because "upstairs downstairs," but now you know people from poorer countries are coming in to do it. So I'm just worried about the class divisions, the immigration divisions. Are we trying to solve one equality/inequality issue by creating another one? So I don't know where I stand, actually. I kind of get both points of view. And so this time, I may go with an earlier speaker and just abstain.

Moderator: I think I saw the next speaker from before that. And so that speaker volunteered before... The speaker.

The speaker: Mr. Chair, there's no such thing as free childcare unless it's done by grandparents as a sort of duty. Childcare requires premises, it requires facilities, it requires qualified people who get paid a salary. And so there are costs, and if it's a large corporation and they can provide all that and simply absorb the costs, then fair enough. But in most cases, that's not the case. So it's the taxpayer who's going to foot the bill. And the argument, of course, I suppose, is: well, it'll boost the economy, all these women being able to dump their child on somebody else so that somebody else looks after them while they go to work and do what if they want something else, and it'll boost the economy. Well, I wonder about that, because...

Moderator: Sorry, sir, that time. Thank you.

The speaker: My pleasure. But I know that your interruptions are always long-winded, so I'm sorry, not this time. Economically, does it pay? I mean, you hire a woman to do a job, and then she comes and says, at some point, to her boss, "Excuse me, but I'm pregnant, and I need to take maternity leave," and so she's got statutory maternity leave of whatever it is, six months. So the boss has to say, "Right, we'll get somebody to stand in temporarily," which is somebody

to recruit to do that job, which might be really quite difficult. You know, had somebody been recruited if I'd taken maternity leave, for example, and somebody recruited to take my job, that would have been extremely difficult. As a computer engineer, you have to have certain skills. So, and then at the end of the six months, or whatever it is, very possibly she'll say, "I want to extend it for another three months." Just as my daughter-in-law did, because she said to me, "I've got to extend it for three months because my brain has turned to mush." She said, "All I can think of is feeding times, bathing times, nappy changes, pooing, peeing, etc etc." And that was, you know, what childhood did. So she said, "I can't go back to work. You know, my brain's a mess." So really, that is all a cost to the employer. So it's not surprising that there is what the proposer called a motherhood penalty. You know, it's all very well to think we could sort of erase it, but it's there, and I don't think that you can just sort of erase it by providing free childcare. Another thing that the opposition has touched upon, of course, was fathers being competent to look after young children. Well, some fathers might be. In my case, my children, when they were young, always wanted Mummy. They didn't necessarily want Daddy. Except... all right, you can laugh, all right... except when I came home from work and I would read them a story. And I read my children stories for many years, and that was the highlight of their day. It was a highlight of mine as well, as a matter of fact; I loved reading the stories. And then it came to the point where my eldest son, I was reading him *The Lord of the Rings*, and he got so keen on it that he would take it to school, and then he would read it on the car or whatever. And when he came back, he jumped ahead, and I saw where we'd left off, and he jumped ahead and I missed out. But there it is. But I do think that come the age of about 12 or 13, children really do need a father, because, for some reason, they don't listen to Mummy anymore. They need Father to say something. Now that might be contentious. I can see sort of frowns creasing a few brows here, but that was my experience. Certainly round about 12 or 13, the children stopped listening to Mummy, and they would only listen to Papa and get to Daddy. And certainly, when they get to 16, they develop a complete will of their own, and they definitely need a Daddy at that point. So I do... now, stop stirring it. They definitely need a Daddy round about that time, which is why I think, you know, it's very important to have a two-parent household, because really rearing children, you do need both Mummy and Daddy because they both have respective responsibilities and roles to play. Thank you.

Moderator: Thank you. The speaker, would you like to go before the break? Yeah, the speaker.

The speaker: Mr. Chair, as often happens, I have a very complicated relationship with this motion. I don't suppose I can do very much. To give you an idea, I think that gentleman made the point that there are fundamental differences between men and women. So I don't have to go into that. I think that is the core of the problem. Now, at the moment, I happen to be reading about Hitler's government from the eyes of his Minister of Armaments. And he found out that British women, far more of them than German women, were working in munitions structures. The Nazi Party wouldn't let him do it in Germany; they said, "If you make women work, they may not be able to bear children." He wasn't able, therefore... he was very, very good at getting the armaments going and keeping them going, but he couldn't get his way on that one. Later, he wanted to wind up and abolish the cosmetics industry and therefore move all the people working in that into his armaments factories. Hitler's girlfriend wouldn't let him do that either. She rebelled at that time.

I would point out that the attitude would be in Britain and everywhere else that the woman's place is in the home, the man's job is to earn the income to support the family. I think our young proposer hasn't realised that what's happening now is not usual. It's a development that occurred gradually. More and more women from the wartime onwards, and perhaps a bit before working-class women usually did work... Now someone has made that point. Gradually, the middle-class women began to see if they work with their husbands, they can buy a house. And that beast raised the prices of houses and ensured, as now, almost every woman has much the same employment prospects now. But is that actually right? Women are not the same. The women bear the children. Should not the men be responsible, ultimately, for the income to keep those children properly? And I would say that the place of a woman with children is in the home. That's my view. At some point, maybe the woman can come back to work, but there's bound to be the problem that has been mentioned of the difference in earning. I don't believe, again, that men and women are the same. They're not having got the same necessary things and prospects that can be the same in a man's employment world. My work is in trends, and I have forecast that one of the things that could happen is if all medium-sized employers have a crèche at the workplace, so that married women with children, I suppose, can bring their children to work. But that hasn't happened. Virtually no large employer does that. I suppose you have a problem, as I used to work in [company] from here in one of the largest multinational corporations in the world; in its industry, everyone commuted in from the suburbs. How could you bring your children with you if you were a girl? So I think the problem needs to be rethought from first principles, and the proposer sees things that is happening now that wasn't the case around the war, even in Germany and in Britain. The woman's place is in the home. That I think still is the case, certainly for young children.

Moderator: Thank you, the previous speaker. So we get all of our pale, male, stale, white males out of the way before the break. The speaker, would you like to just add to the round and make it a three-piece?

The speaker: I don't like to travel the Romans. My blood pressure is not high enough. I know what it looks like in Roman times. Madam President, fellow Sylvans. When so many children in our world are starving and there's poverty, war and famine and the world is overpopulated, surely what we need is universal world equality. Of course, I've got a solution, being a sort of practical sign, that kind of person. And the practical solution is this: instead of spending all our resources on weapons and warfare and defence, why don't we apply the research so that the men can have the babies? They won't survive childbirth. Because I understand it's the most exhilarating, yeah, painful experience. I don't think any of my friends have ever called it that. I might be entering into the world of science fiction and fantasy. But fiction is stranger than truth. You only have to see the Earth soap operas like the Windsors. Now, let the research happen, and men can go through the nine months of excess, ecstasy and pain, but the ultimate reality of giving birth... what a wonderful experience, a rewarding experience, not even achieved in the 60s or the Roman Empire.

Even let me be specific about this poverty, because it's still around today, and the influence—even despite in my lifetime we had a woman Head of State in this country. So don't say that they can't get to the top. Of course, it's still going on today. We know what the Windsors are up to and who's in control. And so let's talk about real equality. And of course, it's happening all over the world, and the Empire and these people in power and influence are just putting

down the working class. Even France has sent a letter to all 29-year-olds to reproduce. Who wants another Louis Vuitton or Emily in Paris? You can see what I watch. I'm told to do so. So, two minutes? I got two minutes, I'm doing well. So what do I want to say? It's about power and influence, and we know that a high percentage of the wealth and power in this country is only controlled by a few per cent of the population, some of them women, of course. And if you look throughout history, we got historians... who have been the most powerful rulers? Victoria, Elizabeth the First... going back to this first civil war. So and who, actually, as an earlier speaker was saying, is the main influence on the socialisation of people like me? It was my mother. So that's a powerful argument that to change society, you need women. And so why shouldn't they have their just deserts and have the value foisted on us by their charm, intelligence and every other quality that I haven't got? And that's probably why I'm not a woman.

Moderator: Right, let's come back for the second half. Please. Thank you not taking anyone over 40 for a little bit. So I'm looking for other people. Yep, we do have a volunteer here. The speaker. Oh, the speaker, great.

The speaker: I'm going to speak in opposition to the motion. Quite a variety of arguments this evening. I'm not going to make the kind of traditional women's role and men's role argument. I think we desperately need more female leaders and CEOs. An excellent book on the subject is Caroline Criado Perez's *Invisible Women: The Data Behind Inequality*. Because there aren't enough female CEOs, crash test dummies for cars are tested against male bodies rather than female bodies predominantly, so car driving is less safe for women. Cities are often designed in a kind of residential/shopping/business arrangement which means women just have to travel further they need to now. Just takes time out of the day, makes just... it's just against the interest of women. And the most important one was the boards of pharmaceutical companies are often male-dominated. So very promising drug trials of drugs to solve women's health issues never make it to approval stage. So there's a huge opportunity cost in pharmaceutical interventions to improve women's health. If we have more female CEOs, they'd be represented at board level. They'd make the cases to represent these in the product design. And not only would women's interest be better served, but also the work will just be a better place. We've produced far more better products and better city design, just kind of better everything, really. So we need female CEOs. We need equality. And we need, I think, the specific definition of equality here, which is having more women in leadership positions as much as men.

But I'm not a fan of the universal childcare. Solid argument. First point to make is it's another "the state should do this" argument, which assumes that our public finances, not just in Britain but probably throughout Europe as well, are in rude health. They're simply not. It's another kind of block that we're putting on the top of the kind of unsustainable tower of obligations that can't be brought to stop, and eventually, we need to kind of evaluate what the state does and whether it can do less, but do it well.

My second point against the argument is, I don't... it just portrays childcare as a burden where it's actually a really special thing, bringing up parents bringing up their children. You know, we were all kids once. We all prefer being picked up in school by parents, not by a nanny. It just... I'm just very, I don't have any data to quantify this, but just the emotional welfare of children in the kind of joint family life shouldn't compete against people's careers.

And then I just want to make a... but I think my most important point is calling for universal childcare... it's not the main cause. It's... an argument for equality is uniformity. And I think the

more likely equality we're going to get is the equality of variety. And the universal childcare provided by the state just assumes that it gets in the way of both parents' career success, and that the way to live a good life is for both of you, both ambitious parents, to pursue their careers at all costs. It also falls into a similar vein as the more paternity leave for five months, six months, a year. The kind of tone is both uniformly across society: both men and women are going to prioritise their careers with equal intensity and leave the rest of time sharing family life equally. And I just don't think it's going to work like that. I think the more plausible equality we're going to get is the equality of variety. And it looks like this: 25% of, say, married couples would... or maybe it's more like 10%... 10% of married couples would be super ambitious and pursue their careers to the fullest, both man and woman. The other say 40% will be the kind of 60% intensity on career, then maybe 40... and then 40% each balancing the household chores, picking up the children, looking for the children. But then sometimes 50% there. But then the real shift is going to be the 25% where the woman runs the home and looks after the children, the man's the primary breadwinner. But the other 25% will be where the woman is the primary breadwinner and rises to the fullness of architecture, to the top of important companies, but then it's the man that does the household chores and brings up children and really enjoys it because it is meant to be joyful. And that's the remedy, I think: encouraging more men to be stay-at-home dads, and promoting our society and making sure that that choice from the earliest age is possibly celebrated and not patronised as a good thing for men to do. That's quite a bit.

Moderator: Thank you, the previous speaker.

The speaker (Floor): From both the speakers, I think the gender pay gap is something which is a behavioural thing that needs a behavioural and attitude phase. But just for the sake of the debate, if you're taking universal childcare as a tool to fix the gender gap, I personally think this tool in itself lacks a good structure. For example, this universal childcare, which is there at the moment, won't cover all the women who are working. So to start with a very basic example, the current criteria—and please correct me if I'm wrong, this is just based on my story—the current criteria is that a woman, or not just a woman, I mean there is a limit of 30 hours, right? So assume, like, is that 30 hours sufficient for a woman who is at a different career, who is at the journey, who is at a different journey in their career? For example, if a new mum is starting her job, that 30 hours is sufficient for her. But is that the same for the woman who is leading a company and is a CEO? So the structure in itself raises a challenge for me.

The second example would be the eligibility. The current eligibility is that the person, like the parent, either of the parents, should be earning less than 100k. Again, the same question arises: what if a woman is an experienced woman and has her pregnancy late in the career? Will she be able to get the benefit of this programme? So in short, this structure will not be serving to the entire woman fraternity. It will be good, but to a certain set of limited women. So to put up my point and conclusion, this is a good tool, but it is not effective at this thing. So I am with the opposition for now.

Moderator: Thank you, the previous speaker. Yes, your name again, the speaker.

The speaker: So it's been great hearing the speakers, and a lot of my thoughts have come up in reaction to some of the contributions. So one of the against speakers' points was that we exist in a patriarchy and that it's more of an attitudinal and cultural problem. And then it was commented on by a contributor as slightly laying the fault on men, which I found interesting and pointed out the expectation of men paying for the first date. And I just wanted to highlight in this instance

how I feel this kind of validates the speaker's point in that it is an attitudinal problem, and how the money of paying for the first date is noticed and acknowledged, but that much of women's labour is made invisible. And so I would say, for any men in the room who have families, that to have a family without the free labour of a wife or partner, it's about 180,000 pounds. To have a surrogate to deliver a baby, and then if you get like a part-time chef or get a babysitter... what else is cleaner... to have these roles paid for in terms of workforce? This is out of many typical people's budget to be able to do so. To accommodate this, women's labour is made invisible and it's undervalued. Yeah, what else do I want to say? Yeah. To sum it up, I agree with the against position, and I think that it runs a lot deeper than a simple economic sum, even though I did just put it down in terms of monetary value. The fact that you can't see the labour shows that it's more a perspective. And yeah.

Moderator: Thank you, the previous speaker. Anyone else like to come up?

The speaker: I definitely can't match that level of eloquence, but I'll try my best. So essentially, I had a couple of exams these past few days, and I wasted my time watching a show that I'm guessing a couple of you all have already watched. So it's my favorite show. It's called House MD, that features a very famous British actor, Hugh Laurie. And in once, in one particular season, there was a scene where there's a man who's rushed into the emergency room with a dislocated shoulder, and there's four people who go and run to him trying to fix the shoulder. But then comes in Dr. Gregory House with his cane, and he rushes him straight into the operating theatre. And everyone's confused, because what Dr. Gregory House essentially saw was that there was lack of blood flow that was going to the person's toe, which in fact, was a signal of a very complicated disease that he had to treat first. So I think it's a slightly complicated parallel, but what I'm trying to say is that dislocated shoulder out here, fixing the dislocated shoulder is like advocating for childcare. And the lack of blood flow actually in the toes is essentially the greater systemic issue.

I think everyone who has spoken so far has communicated one thing extremely clearly: that there's no harm in providing equal childcare. Well, I'm for equal childcare. There's no problem about universal childcare to everybody, but is that going to solve the problem? Is that going to be the greatest boost to equality? Well, maybe not. I think there are a lot of women who don't have children. There are a lot of women who don't work. There are a lot of women who don't want to work, in my opinion, and therefore the same goes with men. So I think the largest systemic issue has to be looked at and solved first. Two out of every three domestic abuse victims in the UK itself are women. So I think before figuring out whether the pay is going to be equal, whether they're going to get universal childcare, I think what a woman is more worried about is: Am I safe? So I think firstly, we need to address safety concerns, and then we could move on to this debate of whether childcare is going to be the greatest solution. I think there's a very famous quote that I'm probably going to end with that says that every complex problem has a solution that is extremely clear, simple and wrong. So it may feel that pumping money into the economy and spending will solve the problem, but until greater systemic issues are solved, I don't think that is going to lead to its solution. Thank you.

Moderator: Thank you, the previous speaker. Any final speakers? Right? Thank you. The speaker, yep. Very good. Last gasp. The speaker.

The speaker: So where am I? Okay? I voted in... initially I voted in favour of the motion. And if you just bring people back to the motion, the motion is: universal free childcare would provide

the greatest boost to equality for women. So obviously, there's been a lot of talk about equality for women. But we're saying, okay, is this the thing? If we had a list of 100 things which could boost equality for women, would this be number one? So then you have to think, okay, what are the alternatives? And a number of the alternatives have been spoken about this evening, and you could put those on a piece of paper. You say, okay, well, where does that come versus childcare? Universal childcare, in my mind, I think that it's probably up there.

Yeah, so can I just say one thing? One speaker mentioned, by the way, I'm not a Reform voter at all in any way, shape or form. But, you know, somebody mentioned that Reform was saying that there should be a penalty if women didn't have children, and that, you know, that's not true. That is not true. What happened was that Matt Goodwin, who was one of the candidates... was a candidate to Reform last week in Manchester... in a blog in 2003 he said he put forward that idea. It isn't a Reform policy. Now, as I say, I'm not a Reform advocate, but you know, it's important that people hear and read and understand what's actually being said.

Anyway, it's been interesting this evening in another way, really, in the fact that the demographics in this room are quite widespread. And when you listen to people stand up and you listen to them talk, you find that older generations—let's just put it that way—older generations have a view about women and what they should be doing, etc, etc, and their place in the home, etc, etc. And then, you know, so we get people who may have been born in the 1940s, 50s, 60s. And then we come through, and we have people who were born in the 2000s, late 1990s, 2000s, much more recently. And then we have men, and we have women, and we're all conditioned to a certain degree. And we look for things. We look for almost confirmation bias. We look for things which support our view.

I'm a Victorian... You know, I've been fortunate. I've been fortunate that I've worked in a lot of places, and I've worked in Scandinavia. I've worked in Scandinavia two states for about six years in total. And one of the things that really struck me... we were in the project back in 2015 and we flew into Oslo, and there was a small group of us. We got off a plane, we went into an office in Oslo, and being the Brits, we were used to working from eight o'clock in the morning till eight o'clock at night. At half-past three in the afternoon, there wasn't a Scandinavian left in the office. All the—and it's primarily guys—all of the guys had gone. Scandinavians have a feeling about childcare, and they say and about their quality of life, "This is what they do." And the project got delivered on time as well. You know, we all get caught up in this world which says we've got to do long hours, otherwise, we seem to be slackers. I think that fundamentally, it's about choice. So for that choice to be available if you're rich or you're poor, or you're educated or you're not educated, it is up to government to be able to give the framework to enable you to live the life that you want to live. Okay, so fundamentally, I'm agreeing with the motion. I'm supporting the motion because I think that universal childcare is a top... is the top of the list of all the 100,000 things that we can vote on. All right, thank you.

Moderator: Thank you, the previous speaker. We've got people coming at the last minute. Anyone wanting to jump in still? Okay? I think we can say that we've exhausted the floor speeches. Thank you everyone for your contributions. We will now come back to the main speakers for summation, and then we will move to the vote after that, and we will start with the opposer. So back to the opposer.

The opposer: Thank you. My speech might be a bit rambling. I've written quite a lot of notes on what I would usually do is a bit of a skeleton speech, so forgive me if it's not quite as together as

I'd like it to be. So as we've said, the debate isn't about whether universal free childcare is a good thing. It's about whether it's the greatest boost to equality for women. I am not at all saying that this isn't a good thing. It is a good thing; it just is. I don't think it's the greatest boost. I think it's a societal thing. I think it's a structural thing. I think it's an institutional thing. There's a lot more that we need to do before we look at free childcare. And I think that one of the... I think who was it? I've written your name down, the lady, you were speaking quite early. Yes, you spoke to say you're talking about children and that you weren't going to have children. You know, whether that's my choice or not, it's really, really important, I think, to remember that we're all different, right? We're all part of the society. Some people decide not to have kids. Why should they have to sort of fork out for everybody else's life choices? What about all of the other things that people who don't have children have to face? I mean, I've spoken about a number of them, their presentation of things, so what you look like.

I'll come into the date thing. So, yeah, I told you I wouldn't seem to be that eloquent, and I'm not being. I genuinely feel very passionate about this. I think the first person that spoke was the first floor speaker, and you started by saying, "Can I speak?" And that spoke volumes to me. Yeah, you can. We need men to speak for women. We need men to support us and to talk about women's issues and to be supportive of your sisters and your friends and, you know, your daughters and your nieces your wives. You know, we need men to speak up and give us your views about women's role in society. It's really, really important. It's critical. And one of the points that was raised quite a lot or talked about quite a lot was around the role of fathers in society in depth. And I just wanted to speak a little bit about my own personal experience, just because I think it reflects a number of them.

Say, my grandma was born in the 20s, my parents were born in the 40s, and my brother and I were born in the 70s. And my grandma, quite unusual for somebody in her early 50s when we moved away to North Yorkshire, decided to learn to drive. And that was quite a big thing. Didn't do that kind of thing. My god, she didn't do that when you were her age, but she did it, and it inspired my mum to start to do things, to look at the world in a different way as well, to say, "Well, okay, maybe I can do this. Maybe I can do that." And my dad was incredibly supportive of my mum. So being born in the generation they were born in, it pretty much meant that my dad was the one that had the career, and he did. He was a very, very successful head teacher, and that also meant, incidentally, that he looked after us during the school holidays, and he was very, very good at it. And this whole notion about, I'm sorry to bring it back, but, you know, I was pretty scared of my mum when she was in a bad mood, you know, there's no two ways about it. My mum and dad—both very, very warm, very, very loving, inspirational role models—and they shared the childcare. And when my mum had the opportunity, she worked. And yeah, you might bring that down to universal free childcare, but I would say it's much more about the attitude of society and what is expected of women and what is expected of men. And this is why we need men supporting women. It's not about blaming men. It's about asking them to support us, because you will all know people—men, I'm talking about here—whose women friends, relatives, whatever, haven't been able to advance as much as they'd like to be able to just because they are a woman.

Actually, an earlier speaker, you spoke about the date analogy. You know, I think the idea of going on a date with you, as I said downstairs, sounds wonderful, because you paid for everything. You know, absolutely fantastic. You know, I'm very happily married, but, you know,

who knows, maybe the future. In all seriousness, that made me think about actually, all of this. I can't remember who said it. Now, there are lots of subliminal things that face women that aren't brought out into the fore, even when you go on a date. Like, I don't know whether or not you like my hair. And I want to say actually that I don't really care, but I do. And the reason I do, I know, is because I dye it, right? My hair is going grey. Actually, to just get my hair looking moderately okay—and this isn't a good hair now, be honest with you—it still costs 160 pounds to have highlights. If I was going on a date with an earlier speaker, I'd want to have my hair done. I'd want to have my makeup done. I'd want to do all of that. None of that are things that typically men have to do, but I have to pay for. It's expensive being a woman. It's expensive being a woman. Even sanitary care. You know, that's something that men don't have to think about. This isn't about childcare. Sorry, this isn't about childcare. It's about equality of opportunity, it's about societal shift. It's about an institutional change.

There's so much more that I would like to be able to say to this. But my notes... childcare only frees women to work if it fits with childcare hours. Senior roles that require shift work shut women out. They do. The equality of opportunity isn't fair, and as I said before, even the women in Parliament who make the laws can't escape being the default parent, being judged for caring responsibilities, scrutinised for their appearance. And free childcare won't fix that. Changing all the things that I've spoken about tonight and more is what's needed. I think that universal free childcare is really, really important, but it's treating the symptom and not the cause. You need to treat the cause, and you need to treat other things first, right? It is very, very important. It's not the most important thing, but it is extremely significant. So equality won't come from money. It will come from changing the system that's stacked against women from the root upwards, and if the root is the equality of culture, universal free childcare can't be the greatest boost.

Moderator: Thank you. The proposer.

The proposer: It was really hard for me not to change my own vote with the opposer's closing, because I think you'll see there's a lot of passion and care and a very similar issue between us. And I think she covered a point exceptionally well. And also, really the floor speeches... I think this was one of the most engaging debates I've ever been part of, because I think it's such an important issue. And I want to just explain why I believe universal free childcare will be a bit of a boost. I think we've seen very good demonstration with the experience I've had over my life. I'm not a mother. I chose not to be a mother, yet I still pay the same price as other women do because I get discriminated against. I had investors asking, "Am I going to have children?" I run my own businesses, and my dad turned around to my ex-husband and said, "What do you think of that?" These are issues that we live and breathe and have to deal with every single day. Now, a lot of attitudes and opinions on this is very much that, you know, women get up in arms over these things, and you have to deal with all of those comments. I've had one CEO of an expert call my business partner and say, "Control her antics," because I told them... I said the exact same thing as a man that then presented the same view. And that's the shit we have to deal with.

So let me just frame that very quickly, because the top 100 companies, the CEO levels, have not changed in 10 years. There were six in 2006. Take a guess how many now? Nine. So do you want to tell me that getting more women into leadership positions is going to make any difference to general inequality that women face in the workplace? No, it will not. We need to fix the system, not the woman. That is fundamentally why I believe that we cannot change attitudes

quickly. We will never change attitudes quickly. It takes ages. We've had quotes dating back to the war. Great, thanks. Glad I wasn't born then. I'm sorry to get animated about this, but I want people to understand that anger comes from dealing with this in a career where I have to compete and be a minority every single day. 2% of venture capital funding goes to women. You do not want to know what I deal with at a senior level because I'm a woman, because until you've walked a day in my shoes, you won't see it. So actually, I think the biggest boost to equality would be to give everyone a way to have virtual reality and see someone else's lived experience every day, to understand where these things come from. But that will not happen. So we have to use economic levers. Because there was such a brilliant comment that I actually think... and an earlier speaker, you framed these things really well. I think there were tons of brilliant comments like I said. I really enjoyed the debate. But saying that we should always focus on getting more senior leaders is very elitist. The vast majority of the workforce are not senior leaders. The vast majority of people are on an average income doing jobs that they want to do. The average earnings in the UK is 37,000 pounds. If 12,000 of that is childcare, what the hell. So I do not think attitudes are going to change fast, because we've waited so long. 132 years, that's how long it will take. I'm sorry, I don't have the patience for that. I'm not going to sit around and wait for attitudes to change on something where I'm facing issues every single day. You know, there's no evidence that women are worse than men at work. Why the hell is there a 33% pay gap? Why am I being asked if I'm going to have children? What difference does that make? They are systemic issues. Sexism is huge. There are tons of levers, but I do not believe we will change levers with attitude or culture because that's not going to happen. It's not fast change. So give women the opportunities to do something for themselves, to give them an ability to earn workforce more, keep their experience if that is their choice. And that's why I believe economic levers will be more impactful than shifting attitude or culture, because I'm really bored of waiting for it.

Moderator: Thank you, the proposer. Right. Let me reread the motion. We will go to the vote. So if I can pull this up... and sorry, before I do that, I should say thank you to the main speakers for the amazing framing of this debate. It was brilliant. This is an excellent debate, and we did, as some of the other speakers referenced, pull in a huge range of opinions, and hopefully we have a little bit of a synthesis.

But let's see. Universal free childcare would provide the greatest boost to equality for women. All those in favour of that, please raise your hand.

Okay, and all those opposed.

Okay, any abstentions?

Abstentions did not carry. Let's be clear about that. So by a vote of 11 in favour, seven opposed and four abstentions, the motion has carried. The pre-vote was six in favour, 10 against. So it did flip. Hopefully, that was wisdom that we clicked there.

## **Analysis of the outcome powered by AI**

# The Sylvans

**Motion:** Universal free childcare would provide the greatest boost to equality for women.

**Date:** 2 March 2026

The motion before The Sylvans was that universal free childcare would provide the greatest boost to equality for women. Following a passionate exchange of views that spanned economic theory, cultural sexism and biological essentialism, the motion carried.

The debate opened with the proposition arguing that the 'motherhood penalty' is the single largest systemic driver of inequality. The proposer highlighted that under the current trajectory, it will take 132 years to reach gender parity, a timeline they deemed unacceptable. They argued that the gender wage gap is negligible until a woman has her first child, after which it widens significantly due to the prohibitive costs of nurseries and the inadequacy of the current '30 hours free' scheme in the UK. By framing universal childcare as a hard economic lever rather than a soft cultural wish, the proposition contended it would immediately arrest the compounding loss of earnings and experience that women face.

In response, the opposition argued that while **universal childcare** is a positive step, the motion demanded it be the *greatest* boost, a title they believed it did not merit. The opposer posited that inequality is rooted in deep-seated cultural attitudes and sexism that affect all women, not just mothers. They noted that 20% of women never have children yet still face pay gaps, harassment and a lack of representation in leadership. Citing Finland as a case study, the opposition warned that state-funded care does not necessarily solve the gendered division of domestic labour. They maintained that unless the culture that views women as the default carers changes, economic policies are merely treating the symptom rather than the cause. The floor debate was vibrant and exposed a generational and ideological divide within the room. Some speakers supported the opposition by arguing that linking womanhood strictly to motherhood is reductive and ignores issues like domestic violence and safety. Others, however, inadvertently strengthened the proposition's case by voicing traditionalist views; one speaker argued that a woman's place is in the home and that children 'need a daddy' to discipline them, a sentiment that appeared to push the room toward a desire for structural reform. A final floor speaker noted that **universal childcare** represents a tangible, actionable item at the top of the list of solutions, unlike the vague concept of 'cultural change'.

In the summation, the opposition reiterated that money cannot fix a system built on patriarchy and urged men to step up in supporting cultural shifts. However, the proposition's rebuttal proved decisive. Visibly frustrated by the slow pace of change, the proposer argued that waiting for societal attitudes to shift is a luxury women cannot afford. They dismissed the focus on elite leadership roles in favour of helping the average working woman and concluded that economic levers are the only fast-acting mechanism available. This argument for immediate structural intervention over long-term cultural evolution resonated with the audience, swinging the vote from a pre-debate loss to a victory for the motion.