

Motherhood and Myth-making: Despatches from the front-line of the US
mommy wars

Kim Akass, University of Hertfordshire

There is a special place in hell for women who do not help other women.

~ Madeleine K. Albright (2006)

There are very few jobs that actually require a penis or vagina. All other jobs should
be open to everybody. ~ Florynce Kennedy (quoted in Steinem, 2011)

Looking at the acres of newsprint dedicated to mothering it is clear that, as a society, we view childrearing as one of the most important jobs a woman can do. Everyone has an opinion. For example, mothers should not work, as children of working women are more likely to be overweight and less educationally able. Mothers that do stay-at-home should not over-protect their children for fear of tying them to their apron strings. Women should have their children early, in case their eggs become stale, but women should not have their children too early, as the state cannot afford to support teenage mothers. And single motherhood should be avoided at all costs, because everybody knows that single mothers are a sure fire route to juvenile delinquency. Thank goodness the media is there to regularly give guidance on what is the best way to mother.

Or is it really that simple?

Is it possible that the agenda behind mothering advice is less than helpful; more an instruction manual on what suits society than what is best for our mothers and children? Consider this: over the past decade the American media has been full of a phenomenon known as the mommy wars. Ignited by a New York Times article “The Opt-Out Revolution” (Lisa Belkin 2003), it preyed on maternal guilt, pitted stay-at-home mothers against working ones, reanimated old misogynist beliefs about women’s rightful place and inspired passionate debate across America. Seven years on and it looks as if Britain has got caught up in the battle as The Observer’s Lucy Cavendish writes from the viewpoint of a “self-confessed ‘slack mother’” reporting “from the frontline on why motherhood has become such a hot topic” (Cavendish

2010). Deploying the same warmongering terminology as earlier US news reports, Cavendish's article goes on:

Working mothers can't stand stay-at-home mothers; older ones think their younger versions are too overindulgent. Those who choose not to have children are militant about those who end up having four or more. Hothousing mothers with their endless Kumon maths classes look down on the more laid-back ones who think children should do what they want, when they want. (Cavendish 2010, n.p.)

What on earth is going on here? Can it really be true that British mothers are turning on each other in the way Cavendish describes? And if so, isn't it time we called a ceasefire? According to author Miriam Peskowitz, "Far from helping us understand the social and political stakes of motherhood, the media's Mommy Wars ... transform[ed] parenting into a style war" (2005, p. 6). And whatsmore it was a style war that obscured the real issues facing working mothers.

For example, despite America having the worst maternity benefits in the Western world with "no paid leave for mothers in any segment of the work force, leaving it in the company of only 3 other nations: Liberia, Papua New Guinea, and Swaziland" (Jody Heymann, Alison Earle, Jeffrey Hayes 2007, p. 1) the amount of working mothers in the US has:

[H]eld steady at 53.5 percent [...] When they can afford it, married women with infants take maternity leaves of a year or so, but then head steadily back to work: 75 percent of mothers with school-age children are on the job. Most work because they have to. And most of their stay-at-home peers don't hold it against them. (E.J. Graff 2007, n.p.)

Another of the overlooked issues is the lack of wage parity in the US which is "10 to 15 percent larger for mothers than for women without children; in fact the wage gap between mothers and nonmothers is larger than that between men and women" (Peskowitz 2005, p.67). As Peskowitz argues "the gains for women in the past decades have not meant a similar gain for mothers [...] childraising remains mothers' work, and in many families it's the mother's salary that is balanced against daycare

costs” (2005, pp.66-7). Hardly surprising when the shocking truth is revealed “that mothers who work full time earn only sixty cents for every dollar earned by full-time fathers” (Joan C. Williams 2000, p. 2). Distinguished Professor of Law, Joan C. Williams, director of the Programme on WorkLife Law at American University, argues that the persistent gendered wage gap exists because the structure of the workplace perpetuates the economic vulnerability of those caring for others, particularly mothers. In fact the organization of the market place and family work often leaves mothers with only two options:

They can perform as ideal workers without the flow of family work and other privileges male ideal workers enjoy. That is not equality. Or they can take dead-end mommy-track jobs or “women’s work.” That is not equality either. A system that allows only these two alternatives is one that discriminates against women. (Williams 2000, p. 39)

Problems confronting British mothers are, on the surface at least, less punishing than those of the US. We do have statutory maternity leave and some state-provision of child and health care. But in the light of recent reports stating that “the coalition is happy to restore an outdated ‘male breadwinner, dependent female carer’ model of family life” (Anushka Asthana 2010, n.p.), we would do well to look to the lessons learned from the mommy wars and beware media stories that tell us: “Mothers are each other's nemeses, bickering among ourselves about our own particular style” (Cavendish 2010, n.p.) and heed the lessons of the US media. Headlines like: “Children of working mothers tend to have a less healthy lifestyle” (Jenny Hope 2009), must be read alongside those reassuring us that “mothers can go back to work months after the birth of their child without the baby's wellbeing suffering as a result” (Tracy McVeigh and Anushka Asthana 2010, n.p.). And both should be considered with an eye on the demands of a global recession and austerity measures which, according to the UK’s leading campaigner for gender equality, The Fawcett Society, will impact upon women “hardest---some £5.8 billion of the £8 billion of cuts planned [being] taken from women’s pockets” (Diversitylink.co.uk 2011, n.p.). Working mothers are bound to suffer most as they are still at the receiving end of renewed (and lawbreaking) discrimination with “more than a third of bosses---38 per cent---worry[ing] that mothers will not work as hard as others and will be less flexible about

working hours' (Steve Doughty 2011, n.p.) and admit to not employing them. The Fawcett Society confirms that, as in the US, motherhood in Britain has a "direct and dramatic influence on women's pay and employment prospects [...] typically [lasting] a lifetime" (Woodroffe 2009, p. 3). With an estimated 30,000 British women a year continuing to lose their jobs as a result of becoming pregnant, things look pretty dismal for the future of the working mother (Fawcett Society 2011).

Once the option of a career post-childbirth becomes less likely it is not too big a leap of faith to imagine a generation of middle-class British career women suddenly choosing to "opt-out" as they are forced back into the home. Again there are lessons to be learned from the US as it becomes clear that mothers, desperate to feel empowered in the face of institutionalized discrimination, spout the rhetoric of choice. According to Peskowitz, before The New York Times Magazine article "well-educated mothers who left fancy professional jobs were merely quitting" after Belkin's "Opt-Out Revolution" hit the newsstands the idea of self-determination really took off "and 'opting-out' quickly became part of the national vocabulary to describe mothers who left full-time jobs" (Peskowitz 2005, p. 87). While there are some women who voluntarily choose to stay at home after childbirth, this rhetoric of choice does little to expose the constraints placed on working mothers. For The Observer's political editor, Gaby Hinsliff, "Surrender steals up on the working mother like hypothermia takes a stranded climber: the chill deepens day by day, disorientation sets in, and before you know it you are gone" (2009, n.p.). She was one of the mothers that, faced with working long hours, putting a large portion of her salary towards child-care costs and being too exhausted to enjoy her son, surrendered to domesticity. Her article makes it clear that she did not feel that she had made a free choice, or one based on a need to spend 24-hours a day with her child, but a Hobson's choice made within the constraints of a system that "pulls fathers into the ideal worker role and mothers into lives framed around caregiving" (Hinsliff 2009, n.p.).

When The Washington Post printed the article "The Mommy War Machine" it confirmed what many already suspected that: "The ballyhooed Mommy Wars exist mainly in the minds---and the marketing machines---of the media and publishing industry, which have been churning out mom vs. mom news flashes since, believe it or not, the 1950s" (Graff 2007, n.p.). A sickening addendum however is how battleground terminology, which after all has nothing to do with mothering, has been deliberately used to manipulate readers into buying newspapers, as "everyone knows

that a war, any war, is good for the news business” (Graff 2007, n.p.). Add to this the fact that, according to author Caryl Rivers, “middle and upper-middle class women are a demographic that responds well to anxiety” and it is easy to see how telling women “that working will damage their marriages, harm their health and ruin their children” will not only distract them from the most pressing issues like lack of maternity benefits, childcare and equal pay, but will encourage them to “buy your magazine, click on your Web site, blog about your episode and write endless letters to the editor” (Diversitylink.co.uk 2011, n.p.). It may be just a cynical ploy to get us to buy newspapers but the sad truth is that the mommy wars have distracted mothers across the US from the real issues at stake. Something to bear in mind as, according to Joan C. Williams, the problems facing post-feminist women this century are “less about the obstacles faced by women than [...] about the obstacles faced by mothers” (cited in Belkin 2003, p. 44), a fact that we would do well to remember if the mommy wars are ever declared on these shores.

REFERENCES

Albright, Madeleine K. (2006) Keynote speech at ‘Celebrating Inspiration’ luncheon with the WNBA's All-Decade Team, quoted in Mechelle Voepel, ESPN (July 13, 2006).

Asthana, Anushka (2010) ‘Spending cuts are restoring the old role of male breadwinner’, The Observer, 5 December. [Online] Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/dec/05/gender-equality-coalition-cuts> (28 August 2011).

Belkin, Lisa (2003) ‘The Opt-Out Revolution,’ The New York Times, 26 October, [Online] Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/26/magazine/26WOMEN.html> (24 August 2011).

Cavendish, Lucy (2010) ‘Motherhood: stay-at-home or back-to-work? The battle continues’, The Observer, 28 March, [Online] Available at:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2010/mar/28/motherhood-parenting-debate-stayathome-lucy-cavendish> (28 August 2011).

Diversitylink.co.uk (2011) 'Fawcett Society Seek Judicial Review of Austerity Measures', [Online] Available at:

<http://www.diversitylink.co.uk/resource364/1.html> (28 August 2011).

Doughty, Steve (2011) 'The bosses who won't employ working mothers as firms suffer in the recession', MailOnline, 12 January 2011, [Online] Available at:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1346287/The-bosses-wont-employ-working-mothers-firms-suffer-recession.html#ixzz1Qee6IkJz> (28 August 2011).

Fawcett Society (2011) 'Stop pregnancy discrimination', [Online] Available at:

<http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/index.asp?PageID=644> (28 August 2011).

Graff, E.J. (2007) 'The Mommy War Machine', The Washington Post, 29 April,

[Online] Available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/27/AR2007042702043.html> (24 August 2011).

Heymann, Jody, Earle, Alison and Hayes, Jeffrey (2007), 'The Work, Family, and Equity Index: How Does the United States Measure Up?' Institute for Health and Social Policy, Montreal, QC and Boston, MA, [Online] Available at:

<http://www.mcgill.ca/files/ihsp/WFEI2007.pdf> (24 August 2011).

Hinsliff, Gaby (2009) 'I had it all, but I didn't have a life', The Observer, 1

November, [Online] Available at:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2009/nov/01/gaby-hinsliff-quits-working-motherhood> (28 August 2011).

Hope, Jenny (2009) 'Working mums beware: Why children of stay-at-home mothers have healthier lifestyles', MailOnline, 29 September, [Online] Available at:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-1216806/Working-mothers-beware->

[Why-children-stay-home-parents-healthier.html#ixzz1Qg7hGemy](#) (28 August 2011).

McVeigh, Tracy & Asthana, Anushka (2010) 'Babies don't suffer when mothers return to work, study reveals' The Observer, 1 August. [Online] Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2010/aug/01/babies-dont-suffer-working-mothers> Accessed 28 August 2011.

Peskowitz, Miriam (2005) The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars: Who Decides What Makes a Good Mother? Seal Press, Emeryville, CA.

Steinem, Gloria (2011) The Verbal Karate of Florynce R. Kennedy, Esq. *Ms Magazine* (Summer 2011)

Williams, Joan C. (2000) Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What To Do About It. Oxford University Press, Oxford & New York.

Woodroffe, Jessica (2009) 'Not Having it all: How motherhood reduces women's pay and employment prospects', Fawcett Society. [Online] Available at: <http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/index.asp?PageID=972>. Accessed 28 August 2011.