

'Sticky' male breadwinning culture promises no wins for mums^[1]

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EXCERPTS

When lawyer Helen Telfer fell pregnant with her first child, she wasn't entitled to maternity leave. Working overseas with her husband as he took up a career opportunity in Hong Kong, she quit her own job at a critical moment in her own career to start a family.

It's a decision she still feels strong, though mixed, emotions about, 12 years on.

"There is very much this sense that if you've brought money to the table it's more valuable than the 'soft' stuff like bringing up children and creating a home," she says.

It's a judgement many mothers who have taken extended time out from paid work are likely familiar with. A new survey of Australian parents suggests women in particular are very much stuck between a rock and a hard place when it comes to working and taking time off for children.

Regardless of whether they take maternity leave, stay home to parent full time, or return to work as early as possible, women feel judged - often harshly - the Real Insurance survey of 1,000 parents found.

Men, on the other hand, felt less pressure from social forces on their decision-making.

The survey found that for women to escape substantial negative judgement, they need to follow a rigid return-to-work timetable. Those who return to work within three months of giving birth (deemed too soon, according to 88.4 per cent of respondents), or take longer than one year off to parent full-time (that's considered too long, according to 69.6 per cent), are most subject to scrutiny and judgement from family, friends and colleagues.

Additionally, the unequal opportunities and expectations placed on mothers and fathers presents a breeding ground for guilt and resentment on both sides.

More than a quarter (26.8 per cent) of parents who returned to work earlier than their partner said they felt resentful the other person could stay home and spend more time with their child.

On the flip side, 28 per cent of those who stayed home said they felt resentful that their partner returned to work while they did not.

Juggling act

Even those who do take the "right" amount of maternity leave will come up against judgement and other barriers to choice and fairness, as Helen's twin sister Alison noticed.

Alison, who is managing director at a large financial services company and a self-described "mumsy mum", started her family around the same time as Helen, at home in Australia. Unlike her sister, she was entitled to maternity leave, and took a year for each of her three kids (aged 12, nine and seven), before returning to work four days a week.

That way, she thought, "I can be that 'good mum' but keep my foot in the door at work."

It was a choice she felt compelled to make, partly out of fear that her career would be "over" if she took any more time off.

"I believed at that time that if I didn't go back I wouldn't ever work again and my CV would be ruined and it would all be over. So that was the decision I made, and I found it really hard."

Although she made a choice less likely to attract negative judgment, Alison said she's still been subject to prejudice, depending on whatever role she's currently performing and the beliefs of those around her.

"People are very impressed that I appear to be ... the type of woman who works full time and travels. But there's an underlying assumption there that I must not care about my kids quite as much as the other people who are staying home with theirs."

But during those times she has been an at-home mum herself, Alison noticed other people, in certain environments like school functions, would treat her with less respect.

"When I was at home full time, [people would] never ask you what you do for work. There's an assumption that you don't do anything, and you don't get included in conversations in the same way. Even about world issues."

The sisters say they have both felt grass-is-greener moments about each other's paths earlier on, but they are both now very much in a similar place with juggling work and family, which is very rewarding but "insanely hard at times," Helen says. "We are very supportive of each other."

Elizabeth Hill, chairwoman of the Dept of Political Economy at the University of Sydney, says the male breadwinner model remains deeply entrenched in Australia, even as the cost of living means most families can't afford a single breadwinner.

That leaves women under a huge amount of pressure, as they are expected to strike the perfect balance between primary caregiving and working, without the support of a high quality, flexible, affordable childcare system.

"Australia maintains this view that it is a woman's primary responsibility to look after the kids," she says, despite this country having its "most educated female cohort ever".

"It's completely unsurprising that this group of highly educated women want to use that in the workplace, for both personal satisfaction and most importantly, for economic security."

Many young women are now choosing not to have a family because they "understand the apparent tradeoff" and don't want to compromise that security and personal satisfaction, Dr Hill said.

Where are the stay-at-home dads?

It's not all bad news. Movements towards cementing parental leave for dads and the right to request flexible working hours helps – but men need to be prepared to take it up in much larger numbers if there's to be a cultural change, Dr Hill said.

And that can prove hard, Dr Hill said. While the survey shows men felt far less judged than women, it's likely due to more men than women being comfortable with the status quo.

"We know from research that men tend to request [parental leave and flexible hours] at much lower rates than women and when they do, they're often turned down."

Michael*, 42, found himself up against an ad agency "boys' club" who saw childrearing as women's work when he requested parental leave almost three years ago.

"They were like 'we've all been through the same thing and the agency just doesn't cover that for the blokes'," he said. "They've got a different view of how parenthood and partnership works."

The experience resulted in Michael looking for, and eventually getting, another job.

Dr Hill hopes that more high profile cases of fathers taking up the role of primary caregiver with working mothers like NZ Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, who gave birth to her first child on Thursday, will help to shift to those "sticky" social norms.

Ms Ardern and her partner Clarke Gayford provide "a fabulous model for all modern parents," Dr Hill said.

"High profile examples like this can shift the dial on how workers, employers and the general community think about and approach parenthood."

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