Coronavirus is killing the working mother [1]

It was hard enough to "have it all" before — but the pandemic could force out a generation of moms out of the workforce
Author: Dickson, EJ
Source: Rolling Stone
Format: Article
Publication Date: 3 Jul 2020

AVAILABILITY
Access online [2]

EXCERPTS

In Deb Perelman's recent New York Times op-ed, "In the COVID-19 Economy, You Can Have a Kid or a Job. You Can't Have Both," she details the impossibility of parenting small children during the COVID-19 epidemic, writing, "We are not burned out because life is hard this year. We are burned out because we are being rolled over by the wheels of an economy that has bafflingly declared working parents inessential."

Perelman's piece went viral, causing "you can't have both" to trend on Twitter and receiving a prized retweet from the totem of working parenthood, Hillary Clinton. But as a working parent and as a journalist, I couldn't help but feel that while it articulated much of what I had been seething about throughout the crisis, it also buried the lede. Yes, fathers and mothers are having a difficult time right now; yes, our culture instructing parents to perform at full capacity in their jobs while simultaneously playing Nanny McPhee to their children is a ridiculously extravagant ask.

But it isn't really that everyone in the COVID-19 economy can't have a kid and a job at the same time. It's that mothers, specifically, cannot. It is mothers, not fathers, who have historically shouldered the vast majority of the childcare burden, and continue to do so during the pandemic, according to one one New York Times survey; it is women, not men, for whom the Secretary General of the United Nations warned, "across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated." And as Perelman's piece notes, it is mothers, not fathers, who have historically bowed out of the workforce when their domestic responsibilities increase, thus making it more difficult for them to ever return. It is women, not men, who will take pay cuts and buyouts, who will go from full-time to part-time to no-time, who have spent years accumulating degrees and tasteful outfits and dog-eared paperbacks of Girl Boss, ascending this pile of corporate feminist ephemera to get a boost up the ladder, only to fall rung by greased-up rung. It is women who will learn firsthand what their jaded first-wave feminist forebears have warned them for years: that not only is "having it all" a sham, but that even attempting to have a little bit of both will invariably result in quietly flaming out.

In many respects, this is an unprecedented historical moment, says Stephanie Coontz, director of research and public education for the Council on Contemporary Families. Although mothers have been expected to juggle domestic labor with work for much of history, they were reliant on their communities — for instance, grandparents or neighbors — to assume some of the childcare when they were too busy. "There was this integrated community of work, education, instruction, and exchange that was very hard work, but it wasn't this isolated work," she says. While weepy, coronavirus-themed Facebook commercials may try to convince us that social media and virtual interaction can supplant the loss of this network, "they don't have the actual physical coordination and the interdependence that parents really need," she says. In other words, the COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in an era where parents, particularly women, are expected to achieve a perfect balance between work and childcare, and for basically the first time in human history, they're expected to do it on their own.

Unsurprisingly, many experts have predicted that this doesn't bode super well for women. A report from the United Nations has warned that the precarious economic situation could "roll back" many of the advances feminism has made over the past few decades, with layoffs hitting women disproportionately or forcing women with small children to bow out of the workforce. "We could have an entire generation of women who are hurt [economically]," Betsey Stevenson, a professor of economics and public policy at the University of Michigan, told the New York Times.

It's worth noting, as Perelman does, that compared to many low-income women and women in service industries, middle-class working mothers who have the luxury of working from home are in a position of extraordinary privilege. While there is little hard data on the subject, low-income mothers will also be hardest hit by the impact of the pandemic: "If you're making less money in a relationship and men make more, what's happening is women are staying at home to cover for childcare and these are often low-income women," says Ellen Kossek, a professor of management at Purdue University Krannert School of Management and author of a forthcoming study on the subject. It is proof of how broken the system is that even the best-case scenario (as Perelman and myself embody as happily employed middle-class remote workers), feels so daunting as to be unmanageable.

Truth be told, these prognostications are not anything new. Virtually any working mother has a horror story about feeling pushed out of

the workplace pre-COVID-19, even those who come from a relative position of privilege, because the demands of the American workplace are totally antithetical to the demands of the home. You are forced to take a 30% pay cut as you watch your male partner get raise after raise and promotion after promotion, spending the remainder of your career trying in vain to catch up. You are encouraged to exclusively breastfeed your child for the first year of their life, which no one tells you is almost impossible to do if you're chained to a desk for eight hours a day. And you are forced to apologetically duck out at 5:15, trying to avoid the gaze of your superiors, gazing wistfully at your childfree cohorts as they go off to sip Moscow mules and network at happy hours.

Under the best circumstances, being a working parent feels like being an unwanted guest at the world's most tedious party, and what COVID-19 has done is essentially kick working mothers out of the room altogether. In this sense, it has succeeded where previous efforts to limit women's ascendancy in the workplace — the absence of paid leave, rampant pregnancy discrimination, and loopholes that ensure some employers don't have to institute lactation rooms, just to name a few — have failed: in a scenario so perfect it's almost as if some misogynistic sorcerer conjured it in a dungeon, a global pandemic may well be the impetus for booting working mothers from the workplace altogether.

This is already kind of starting to happen. Over the past few months, policy makers have engineered what they no doubt view as ingenious ways to return children back to school, all of which have been met with widespread ire from parents on social media. Fairfax County in Virginia will be spearheading a part-time policy where students can choose between four days of remote learning or two days of on-campus learning, while Gov. Cuomo has suggested that the 2020-2021 school year could be entirely remote. Employers have also done their part in instituting policies that are wildly ignorant of, if not downright hostile to, the lived realities of working parents, with Florida State University instituting a policy for remote employees banning them from caring for children while working. "[FSU IS] acting like they gave us this privilege to watch our children while we worked — when that's literally what I had to do," one professor complained. (FSU walked back on this policy following backlash on social media, sending an email to staff saying, "We want to be clear — our policy does allow employees to work from home while caring for children.")

That the needs of parents were not taken into account during the development of these policies is apparent; that the needs of working mothers in particular were not considered, doubly so. In the absence of these discussions, the onus has been on parents themselves, not employers or policy-makers or the media. "There's a stigma right now that you cant say 'I'm not available because I'm helping my kid with my homework from 2-3,' and you have to empower people to do that especially during the pandemic," says Kossek. Though she says managers should lead these conversations, the reality is that they so frequently fall on employees that it's clear women aren't just expected to seamlessly perform childcare and household and work duties simultaneously, they're also expected to start the conversation about why such expectations are unfair.

Therein lies the crux of the issue: although much valuable discussion has been devoted to how COVID-19 has exposed the disparities in class, gender, and income, the parenting issue intersects with all three of those things, yet receives relatively little attention. "Why isn't anyone talking about this? Why are we not hearing a primal scream so deafening that no plodding policy can be implemented without addressing the people buried by it?," Perelman writes in her essay. While there are likely plenty of reasons — the relative unclickiness of the importance of paid parental leave among them — the truth is that parenting issues are so often considered as tantamount with women's issues that they've been rendered marginalized in the discourse, almost to the degree that they're ignored altogether.

There are some who are optimistic about the long-term changes that COVID-19 may bring in terms of gender dynamics and parenting. "In the long run we know that when men learn to actually get hands-on experience with the kind of work they were able to ignore for so long, they do do better," says Coontz, citing studies that show how men who take paternity leave end up assuming more of the burden of household labor. Now that men have been forced to pick up some of the childcare burden, becoming more intimately acquainted with its accompanying gifts and travails, "I think there may be some possibilities for forward progress after this," she says.

But such progress is dependent on "how we, as a society, respond to this crisis," by which she means implementing family-friendly policies such as paid leave, decreasing the wage gap, and providing universal health care. "Sometimes there comes a crack in time," Koontz says, quoting a line from a poem by Stephen Vincent Benet. "This is a real crack in time that exposes where the roads have been blocked, where they've been overgrown, where new things need to be built. They're terribly painful, these cracks in time, but they can lead to change." But that assumes that everyone, from policymakers to media figures, sees these roadblocks as roadblocks to begin with, and until more people let loose with that primal scream calling for massive change, then these cracks in time will likely be left ignored.

Related link:

Region: United States [3]

Tags: mother's labour force participation [4]

economic recovery [5]
