

Why Mother's Day is a sham — and how we can do better ^[1]

Opinion: Chocolate and flowers are no replacement for equal pay and affordable child care

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EXCERPTS

"I'm very tired."

"I'm always working."

"It's non-stop."

Those are the words of the women in *Through the Night*, a documentary about a 24-hour daycare in New Rochelle, New York, that screened at this year's Hot Docs festival.

This daycare is run by Deloris "Nunu" and Patrick Hogan around the clock to take care of children whose mothers work hours beyond the so-called 9 to 5 workday. The couple run it out of their home and take turns sleeping in order to accommodate the schedules of the women. Some of the children sleep overnight at the centre. Their mothers are the essential workers who work at all hours of the day in order to fill in the gaps for the wants and needs of a society that runs 24 hours a day, yet fails to acknowledge those who work those so-called irregular hours that keep our economies functioning. They are the ones we've come to rely on during this pandemic.

Most of these workers are making low wages, are racialized, are women. One mother profiled works as a nurse on an overnight shift; the other works three jobs and is desperate to get one full-time job so that she can have more time with her daughters. Her main employer gives her just enough hours so that she doesn't qualify for employee benefits. As one of the women says, "If I didn't have Nunu, I don't know what I would do."

Addressing why there is a need for a 24-hour daycare, Nunu says, "This is the way the world is set up to this point."

Throughout this pandemic, women have been leaving the workplace in order to take care of their children and families. The term *shecession* has become part of the lexicon. According to a report released in March by RBC, since the pandemic began, nearly 100,000 women over the age of 20 have left the workforce, compared to fewer than 10,000 men. Where is the outrage? If men left the workforce at this rate, we would declare a national emergency.

We pretend that we live in progressive times and that women can work, have families — have it all. That may be true for some, but the reality is that we live in a society where the labour of women is exploited without an ounce of thought given to how that affects working mothers and their families. There is still an assumption made that there is someone at home looking after the kids and that, in most cases, it's the mother. And every year on Mother's Day, we pretend to care about these women by promoting a tradition where the highlight for moms is to get some flowers and chocolate. How are chocolate and flowers any replacement for equal pay and affordable child care?

If the idea is to celebrate mothers, why not find a more meaningful way to acknowledge the realities of motherhood?

Last month, the Ontario government had the opportunity to do just that; instead, it voted down Bill 176, the Maternal Mental Health Act. Tabled in 2020 by NDP MPP Bhutla Karpoche, it sought to "expand treatment, supports and awareness of perinatal mental health disorders." It also called on the minister of health to review "the state of Ontario's maternal mental health care and create a provincial framework for action." It would have proclaimed an annual Maternal Mental Health Day every May — you know, when we celebrate Mother's Day. Conservative governments like to trumpet family values, yet this one failed to acknowledge the importance of this bill.

"In 2019, I rose in the legislature with my newborn and spoke about the challenges of postpartum mental health recovery that many new mothers experience," Karpoche said in a press release. "That statement went viral. Numerous moms and moms-to-be reached out and shared their experiences of struggling in silence, without access to postpartum care, without social supports. We leave new moms treading these difficult waters in isolation — yes, during the pandemic, but even before — with not only the assumption that we should be able to manage on our own, but the expectation that our experience is nothing but happiness."

We pretend that motherhood is the most beautiful thing in the world and that there is no bigger joy than to have children. If a woman has a different experience, well, it's their fault, and they should shut up about it. I can't begin to tell you the number of conversations I've had with girlfriends who use the disclaimer: "I really love my children, and I'm so grateful but..." But I'm struggling; I'm having a hard time; I

can't do this anymore. This past year, mothers have done triple duty, helping their kids learn online while working from home with little to no support because of stay-at-home orders. With home ownership becoming ever harder to achieve and the climate crisis worsening, more women are deciding to opt out of motherhood. Is it any wonder Canada's birthrate is declining?

I would run my body into the ground physically in order to take care of my children. But my mental health is a different story.

"Despite the prevalence, maternal mental-health issues are overlooked in policy, government funding, in the health care system, in public discourse, at work, and even in our own homes," Karpoché wrote. "Ontario is without a strategy or coordinated plan to tackle maternal mental health issues. We must change this."

This past Thursday, the Canadian Perinatal Mental Health Collaborative released a report that found that "95.8% of health care practitioners believe that perinatal mental health services are insufficient in Canada" and that when people were screened and needed support, 42 per cent had to wait for more than two months to access help. If you're having a crisis, two months is a very long time to wait. If you're not concerned about the mothers, what about the impact on the children?

Even with a so-called feminist government, it took a woman — Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Chrystia Freeland — to table a federal budget with child care at the forefront.

"After 50 years of talking about it and fighting for it, we're finally going to get it done," Freeland told reporters. "This investment in early learning and child care is historic. We know that early learning and child care is expensive if you do it right, and we're putting our money where our mouth is here. This is going to be a transformational social investment and a transformational economic investment."

Of course, this would depend on the Liberal government being re-elected, and time will tell whether this will become a jurisdictional hot potato, as sick days have been during this pandemic.

In the meantime, families will have to figure out how to pay for child care. With daycare centres being hit by COVID-19, it's safe to assume that spaces will become even more competitive and costs will get only higher.

As of 2019, if you had two children and one was in preschool and the other an infant, you were looking at child care costs of \$35,430 per year in Toronto.

But, yes, 50 years — 50 years since the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, an anniversary that was celebrated this past December against the backdrop of a global pandemic. The 167 recommendations in the report set out how to reduce gender inequality in Canada; I'm guessing that, if it were commissioned today, that number of recommendations would be higher.

"We have looked in great detail at the services which appear to be most urgently needed...daycare centres for full-time and short-term, or emergency care. Such community services received very high priority in submissions to the Commission. The request came from every part of Canada, from the Yukon to Newfoundland, and from small as well as large communities."

Here we are half a century later, and the report reads as if it could have been written today.

There is reason to be optimistic. This past Wednesday, a motion was unanimously carried by the House to recognize the first Wednesday of May as World Maternal Health Day and for Canada to develop a national perinatal mental-health strategy. Once again, time will tell. Unfortunately for many families, time has already been wasted.

Dee's Tots 24-hour daycare has continued to operate throughout the pandemic.

"We are staying open until they shut us down, because our parents need us," Deloris said. "It is a little bit scary, because every person who walks in could bring in COVID-19."

Toward the end of the documentary, Patrick says, "Everyone watch everybody's child as you watch your own."

We should do the same for mothers.

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