

Moms are tired. It's your turn to fix the caring crisis^[1]

News stories need to shift away from mothers' pandemic primal screams and towards the people and institutions that have failed them.

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EXCERPTS

Last winter, the New York Times set up an anonymous phone line for the “parent who’s tired as hell” to vent into. That audio—clips of women confessing in low voices that they’re sick of their kids or maybe not cut out for motherhood, as well as wordless howls of anguish—was the intro to a larger reported series on a pandemic-fuelled crisis among American mothers. Or, more accurately, that this pandemic has exposed. Like many others, I was overwhelmed while listening.

But while I was sympathetic to the voices on that vent line, it was difficult to feel angry or galvanized—even as a mother juggling work and domestic labour and staring down the arrival of a second child at the time. Instead, I just felt sad. I closed my laptop and shoved another load of laundry into the dryer.

Not that anyone has the time and energy for such a thing right now, but if you’ll indulge me: Try this little experiment. Pick any one of the news features that have zeroed in on what’s been deemed a parenting crisis in the past year, many of them deeply and excellently reported. Maybe the Times series, or NPR’s package on how the pandemic is breaking women; or even this story, right here on Chatelaine, about the federal Liberals’ new task force on women and the economy, and how desperately Canadian moms need relief. Drop any of them into a Facebook or Twitter search bar and take a look at who’s sharing them.

For the most part, it’s moms. That is, almost always. Not the men in hetero households made conspicuous by their absence in handling Google Classroom meltdowns while filing day job work at the same time, or the elected officials in charge of children’s right to safe, accessible education—many of whom who’ve all but abdicated that responsibility. I’m often left wondering: Just who are these stories for? And perhaps more to the point, what are they supposed to do?

In her 2018 book-length essay on the cultural role of mothers, British scholar Jacqueline Rose suggests the way art and politics depict maternal suffering often obscures the wider causes of that pain. Focusing on those who lose children to war or other forms of state violence, Rose writes in *Mothers* that “a mother can suffer, she can be the subject of heartfelt empathy, so long as she does not talk or probe too much.” Parenting through a pandemic, obviously, is a completely different circumstance than the violent loss of a child, but the idea stuck with me, resurfacing during these recent deep dives into the state of motherhood. Culturally, we’re happy to allow images of mothers in distress to move us—more than willing to share a link to a story, to post a stylized pie chart on Instagram—but not necessarily into the actions necessary to prevent it. And, perhaps more damningly, to question what kind of mother we’re willing to see suffer in the first place.

Take, for example, the childcare that—whether through early childhood education or at-home domestic care—is overwhelmingly provided by women, largely racialized and migrant women in the case of the latter. Not only is this line of work (as well as long-term elder care, the demographic makeup of which is similar) largely underpaid, poorly protected by government policy and subject to immense strain as an essential service under COVID, it’s also a form of labour that has made the balancing act of middle class working motherhood possible for the past 50 years.

But you’d be hard-pressed to find mention of this among the profiles of women juggling work-from-home jobs and virtual school, or those who have been forced to put white-collar careers on hold to simply get through the past 14 months. As Sylvia Jaffe recently pointed out in *The Baffler*, “Long before the pandemic escalated things, there was a slow-motion crisis happening in millions of people’s lives, manufactured by a society that doesn’t value care, that has splintered us away from one another and demanded we handle every problem by ourselves, or, if we’re lucky, in partnership with one other person.”

Parenthood has always exacted a higher price from working mothers; childcare has always been prohibitively expensive; and through it all, the people providing the care necessary to bridge the gap between the two have been undervalued and underpaid. It’s only when this crisis regularly began affecting those previously comfortable enough to avoid it did that problem get regular notice.

And we’re still not doing anything.

By “we,” I most definitely mean dads. If these stories are meant for hetero fathers, they aren’t getting the message: Despite taking on more

domestic work in the early weeks of the pandemic, men in Canadian and American households then “backslid,” to use the Huffington Post’s words, and still overall shoulder fewer household responsibilities. Also, many of these stories aren’t being framed around their failure to pick up the slack in the first place. Instead, they coyly suggest this absence without specifically calling it out for what it is, encouraging the idea that improving this imbalance is yet another task to add to a woman’s list, on top of everything else.

By “we,” I also mean employers. Even as Canada has recouped much of the employment lost in the first few months of the pandemic, women—particularly racialized women—have been left behind. Aside from individually acknowledging the added pressure working mothers face through public platitudes or work-from-home arrangements, I’ve yet to see a single major employer in this country agitate for the kind of social policy that would help mothers and caregivers keep their jobs and thrive.

I want to believe the primal scream we’ve heard over the past year will lead to change that benefits those who were suffering well before the pandemic. The Liberal government’s recent universal childcare promise in the 2021 federal budget is one hope, but just a flicker, considering that it’s a promise governments have been making and breaking for nearly 50 years. In 2018 the then-Liberal Ontario government promised something similar in its pre-election annual budget before being promptly voted out of office; the Conservatives followed up in 2019 with a tax credit that fell far short of the benefits publicly funded care would provide. Moreover, any universal program worth its salt would need to ensure protected, well-paid employment for the childcare workers who have been pushed to the brink these past 14 months.

After the budget was tabled, Nora Loreto outlined for Chatelaine what needs to happen to make sure that this time, the promise is kept. It’s political pressure—but from a coalition of those who would benefit, not just moms. That includes dads, company owners, senior and middle managers, as well as advocates and activists.

Yes, moms are suffering right now. Deeply, unquestionably and in ways that should make us angry, as I think these stories do. But beyond the initial catharsis for the mothers reading (and screaming) along, stories focused on their pandemic stress need to shift from the people being failed to the things that have failed them. Otherwise, the creaking fault lines of parenting under COVID is only ever going to be understood as a women’s issue. If this pain isn’t recognized as something we’re all implicated in—mothers or not, parents or not—we’re bound to end up here again someday, even after mothers (let’s be real—mostly the white, middle-class ones) have recovered from this.

Mothers need everyone to work with us on this. It’s only fair, since everyone benefits, that everyone shares in the responsibility. Also, we’re too damn tired—cue primal scream.

Region: [Canada](#) ^[3]

Tags: [care work](#) ^[4]

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[2] <https://www.chatelaine.com/opinion/fix-the-caring-crisis/>

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