

The cry of moms everywhere in 2012: 'I need help!' ^[1]

Special to the Globe and Mail

Author: Onstad, Katrina

Source: Globe and Mail

Format: Article

Publication Date: 28 Dec 2012

EXCERPTS:

When auditing the state of motherhood in 2012, one notes a recurring theme: conflict. The Conflict was the title of French philosopher Elisabeth Badinter's much-discussed book admonishing women to stop chasing the ideal of maternal perfection. We also learned of futility in chasing "work-life balance," a subject that continued to fill articles, books and TV segments. And despite the fact that 72.9 per cent of Canadian women with children under the age of 16 work outside the home, the SAHM (stay-at-home-mom) vs. working-mom conflict fuelled the mommy blogs, and the U.S. election.

Season by season in 2012, anxiety stirred the cultural debate around motherhood, offering contradictory advice and few solutions. The culled wisdom echoes William Goldman's adage about the film industry: "Nobody knows anything." Or: "Moms, you're screwed." Of course, our collective motherhood anxiety could be relieved by a wider conversation about public policy and family, but it's less fun to talk universal daycare than to speculate on Kate Middleton's nursery - hers being the motherhood story of the year. As I scramble between (a mere) two kids and two jobs, I'm losing patience with this ticker tape of mixed messages about how to be a mom. Motherhood in 2012 was infuriating, but mostly, exhaustingly unresolved.

In spring, we learned that Europeans are better moms. Bringing Up B  b  , by American ex-pat Pamela Druckerman, championed French parenting, which requires getting a life outside motherhood so that one can enjoy cigarettes and cheese while the kids idle at a distance, chicly. Badinter took this breezy notion to a more politicized level, warning against the exaltation of biological motherhood as a dangerous trap.

Despite the fact that these perspectives were born in a French hothouse that comes complete with subsidized childcare and a springy social safety net, North American moms were happy to latch on, perhaps recovering from 2011's grizzly and tiger-mom attacks.

Then again - just kidding with that cheese and cigarettes thing! In May, Time ran a controversial cover story: "Are you mom enough?" featuring an image of a young mother breastfeeding a rather old child. Turns out the best hope for successful offspring is attachment parenting - the co-sleeping, sling-wearing, 24/7 familial Panopticon that Badinter reviles. (Her phrase "the ayatollahs of breastfeeding" isn't a compliment.)

But in the summer, Anne-Marie Slaughter, the first woman director of policy planning at the U.S. State Department, published a cover story in The Atlantic called Why Women Still Can't Have it All (resulting in a book contract). Slaughter described how the demands of her job in Washington slammed against the needs of her teenaged sons in New Jersey. She resigned. The confessional was a painful illustration of how the corridors of power often don't fit the realities of mothers' lives.

Then, that same season, the message shifted yet again: We can have it all, at least according to the example set by Marissa Mayer, who became CEO of Yahoo while six months pregnant. Of her truncated mat leave, Mayer shrugged: "I'll work through it." Judgment rained down, opening another irresolvable debate: Are women who work soon after having babies to be pitied for what they miss or admired for all they accomplish?

By autumn, the U.S. elections made a mockery of Mayer's careerism with a celebration of old-fashioned, apple-pie mommyism. The Republicans paraded cookie-making, kid-raising Ann Romney (criticized by one CNN pundit for "never working a day in her life," exacerbating the SAHM/working-mom divide). Even Michelle Obama - one-time activist and practising lawyer - played the mom card, referring to herself as "mom-in-chief," and baking cookies for Family Circle magazine, too. This retro fantasy of cuddly, apolitical moms was election branding, not reality, putting forward a tidy version of parenting that elides dads, working mothers, single moms, gay families (also in 2012: a study out of UCLA that found lesbian parents raise the happiest kids) and non-bakers.

Now, in winter, mothers and the rest of us live through and watch the tragedy in Newtown, Conn., heartbroken. An American blogger named Liza Long wrote a widely circulated piece called I Am Adam Lanza's Mother, about her difficulties in dealing with her own 13-year-old's mental-health issues, bemoaning a system where it is easier to criminalize a kid than to treat him. She was unfairly attacked, accused of appropriating pain, and - naturally - being a bad mother. But her plea was sincere: "I need help."

"I need help" may be the motherhood phrase that closes 2012. Canada feels unfriendly to families. At one point, my husband and I were paying almost \$20,000 a year to send two small children to daycare in downtown Toronto; it threw us into debt, and we both make comfortable salaries. Plans for a national daycare program have been replaced by a laughable, taxable \$100 a month. This year, Canada

was ranked the 19th-best place to be a mother - out of 43 countries - in Save the Children's annual State of the World's Mothers Report. Of course, we're doing great compared to last-place Niger, but Canadian women still take on the majority of domestic labour at home and at work, earning on average 25 per cent less than men. Under the Stephen Harper government, the Status of Women has closed 12 out of 16 regional offices and had roughly 40 per cent of its budget cut.

But the erosion of social programs and the anxiety of parents trying to make ends meet weren't the big motherhood stories of 2012. It's easier, and frankly more fun, to giggle at 50 Shades of mommy porn and speculate about royal baby names. So we leave 2012 conflicted, diverted by news of a privileged, unborn baby - picturing the way we wish motherhood were rather than confronting what it is.

-reprinted from the Globe and Mail

Related link: Mallick: Working women with kids need a workplace revolution ... or else [2]

Region: Canada [3]

Tags: gender [4]

mother's labour force participation [5]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/13/01/cry-moms-everywhere-2012-i-need-help>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/13/01/cry-moms-everywhere-2012-i-need-help> [2] <http://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/12/06/mallick-working-women-kids-need-workplace-revolution-or-else> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/gender> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8142>