

MOTHERS AND THE MEDIA

THE MEDIA IS REPORTING THAT MOMS ARE STRESSED OUT...
BECAUSE THEY ARE


by Andrea Mrozek

It was back in October 2006 that “The Motherlode – a Complete Celebration of Motherhood,” was held in downtown Toronto, at the Marriott hotel on Yonge Street. The 10th annual conference, presented by York University’s Centre for Feminist Research, Association for Research on Mothering, addressed topics like teen mothers, raising bi-racial children, post-partum depression and mommy blogs, alongside raising transgendered children, sex-trade workers and mothering and globalization.¹ Certainly a mix from the usual to the deliberately unusual: A discussion of transgendered children and mothering is, after all, an academic pre-ament.²

These academics self-define as “feminists.” But the term has little meaning left. If it refers to the idea that women are equal to men, we are all feminists now. A 2001 survey of adolescent girls showed 97 per cent believed “lifestyle choices” should not be limited by sex.³ Indeed, young women today have every opportunity open to them – and that includes motherhood and a meaningful career.⁴ Yet for a time, second-wave feminists saw things a little differently. Strongly anti-

motherhood, these feminists thought of mothering as “drudgery,” something that women should not be expected to do, unless men did precisely half. Raising children was no longer a respectable feminine calling, but a chore. It’s a reputation feminists today, arguably the third wave, are struggling to overcome.⁵

Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) acted as a force behind second-wave feminism. And if her book sounds offensive, it’s likely because writing that motherhood is “domestic drudgery” and a “waste of human self”⁶ is indeed an assault on the natural inclination to view the self-sacrifice of mothers as a positive. Modern feminists have not left that negative image behind: In 2004 the authors of *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women* mimicked Friedan’s sentiments, writing about the self-realization of women in the 1960s and onwards: “[y]oung women started wondering why they should get married at 21, let alone 18, if that meant getting chained to the diaper pail all the sooner.”⁷ Statements like these are the best proof that second-wave feminism,



very much unlike first-wave suffragettes, did indeed image motherhood as a prison cell in which women are chained.⁸

Today media reports tell the stories of mothers who are indeed in chains – yet the new prison cell is stress and harried attempts at work-life balance. It appears the press presents this negative view time and again because that is how we live. A search for family stories during a two-week period in February⁹ revealed headlines revolving tirelessly around the stress of balancing work and parenting.¹⁰ Parents – especially mothers – are confined to a life that makes the sweat shops of India sound relaxing.

Is there not one woman nationwide who finds peace, a sense of fulfillment and strength through motherhood, a notion which is, or rather could be, beautiful for its simplicity?

Media in the middle: Creator or purveyor of news?

The news media are constrained by certain standing rules on how and what they report, which may lead to a skewed view of motherhood. They must focus on that which is new, which doesn't bode well for front-page motherhood headlines. Second, the media have a tendency to expose, even exaggerate, the negative: A rising divorce rate in adults over age 50 makes the cover of *Maclean's*; that other cohorts are experiencing lower divorce rates is not a cover story.¹¹ All in all, the disintegration of family structure is more newsworthy than Norman Rockwell-esque photo albums.

Finally, there's the second wave of feminism to ride: And the media trend towards credulity on feminist mantras.¹² Headlines that assume a patriarchal conspiracy, that assert a job bias against women who have spent time as mothers at home are some evidence of that.¹³ There is the notion that being "just" a mother, working inside the home, is a waste of valuable column inches, unless balanced with working. The result? The media report on the screaming stress levels of doing both, with stories that focus on making careers successful, with little or no emphasis on successfully raising a family.

Evolutions of feminism

Friedan's "problem that had no name" was not that women faced discrimination in the workplace or that they had few choices outside mothering, but mothering itself. "The feminine mystique permits even encourages women to ignore the question of their identity. The mystique says they can answer the question 'who am I' by saying 'Tom's wife ... Mary's mother.'"¹⁴ As a result, Friedan says, women could not know who they were. "American women no longer know who they are. They are sorely in need of a new image to help them find their identity."¹⁵ American women had

an identity, of course, but Friedan didn't like it. Motherhood and homemaking could no longer be the all-consuming tasks that they most certainly were; motherhood would become a part-time affair, as women balanced their "missing" identity with work outside the home.

Friedan's footprint has been larger than most give her credit for; she is very much with us today. Would not the reasonable woman today merely be happy she has choices and move on? Indeed, the reasonable woman would – but law professor Linda Hirshman, author of *Get to Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World*, well, she isn't one. She recently used her pulpit for yet another modern incarnation of Friedan's words; this time more totalitarian in nature: Educated women must work.¹⁶ In an earlier article¹⁷ Hirshman criticized "choice feminism" – she explained herself in an interview with ABC news. "I think it's a mistake for these highly educated and capable women to make that choice [to stay home]," she said. "I would like to see a description of their daily lives that substantiates that position." She went on: "One of the things I've done working on my book is to read a lot of the diaries online, and their description of their lives does not sound particularly interesting or fulfilling for a complicated person, for a complicated, educated person."¹⁸

So the struggle between sisters continues.

Mothers in the media: The battle of the Crittendens

Ann Crittenden is a former reporter for the *New York Times*, a writer for *Fortune* and *Newsweek* and the author of two books. The mother of one, she lives in Washington, D.C.

Danielle Crittenden is a writer for the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* and author of two books. Mother of three, she too lives in Washington, D.C.

Both are journalists, both are now mothers and writers at the same time. Both hold professional distinction, both are attractive, both are working in and outside the home.

And there the similarities end.

Ann's most famous book is *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World Is Still the Least Valued*.¹⁹ She is concerned that mothers are taken for granted by society. "Even our children have absorbed the cultural message that mothers have no stature. A friend of mine gave up a job she loved as the head of a publishing house in order to raise her daughter. One day, when she corrected the girl, the child snapped, 'Why should I listen to you? You're just a housewife!'"²⁰

Ann writes that feminism hoped that domestic drudgery, as described by Friedan, would be swept into the dustbin of history "as men and women linked

arms and marched off to run the world in a new egalitarian alliance. It never occurred to me that women might be at home because there were children there; that housewives might become extinct, but mothers and fathers never would.²¹

She posits that women are discouraged from taking on that very task we claim to think is the most important – mothering – because of a lack of recognition and even penalties, for the (thankless) labour. How this is done is through an inflexible workplace that does not allow for part-time work, furthermore, she asserts that marriage is not an equal partnership and that government social policies don't recognize the care of one's family members as work. Nannies – legal ones, anyway – earn social security credits in the U.S., mothers at home do not.²²

Enter the second Crittenden: Danielle, author of *What our Mothers Didn't Tell Us: Why Happiness Eludes the Modern Woman*.²³ The problem in her study is different, yet it again features the discontented female. Danielle argues that in a way, women have been sold a raw bill of goods: We have been told that we can become a doctor or a journalist, or have a baby, or probably both, when in reality many realize at age 40 that it is too late for motherhood, thereby denying women that possibility. "Feminism," she writes, "for all its efforts, hasn't been able to banish fundamental female desires from us, either – and we simply cannot be happy if we ignore them."²⁴ Young women today believe they can achieve anything – but they further believe that motherhood is not actually the greatest of achievements.

Ann also points out that mothers and fathers can never cease to exist. And polls bear this out: Not only do women today want to be mothers, but fertility rates in every OECD nation with the exceptions of Mexico and Turkey fall well below the number of children women desire to have.²⁵ For example, in Canada, the fertility rate is approximately 1.5 – Canadian women, however, desire something closer to three children. So what's the problem?

Friedan feminism is one answer, which diminishes mothering and indeed, parenting, by accepting the description of a lot of motherly tasks as "domestic drudgery." Neither Friedan nor Ann Crittenden have chosen to see working an 80-hour week, not uncommon for journalists, at a low pay scale as corporate drudgery, or a grind. The endless interviews, transcriptions, fact checking and demurely deferring to some head honcho's crackpot story ideas strike them as fulfillment and working toward something meaningful.

Journalism, of course, is rife with those intrinsic benefits more than present in mothering: Self expression, issue analysis, creativity. That is precisely Danielle Crittenden's point – not Ann's – on the motherhood front: Motherhood is intrinsically valuable, irrespective of wages, pensions, or rights. Ann might like extrinsic

benefits to be applied to motherhood that it be made meaningful enough to actually do it, Danielle might say that powerful intrinsic benefits are what makes mothering valuable; and furthermore, to make matters for the friends of Friedan worse – feminist notions on motherhood are at least partly to blame for a lack of respect for mothering in general.

Recovering feminists and regenerating mothers

It is a testimony to the power of motherhood that in spite of largely negative headlines, in spite of second-wave feminist mantras, most women say they would like to be mothers, and the most recent World Values Survey shows that women consistently say that being a housewife is as fulfilling as working in a paid job.²⁶

Many women may believe that being a housewife is as fulfilling as work outside the home but can't afford to mother full time on economic grounds. Others simply don't want to. But we without a doubt also absorbed those feminist mantras – the negative second-wave notions – in the media, in our schooling and in our work. Steeped in this environment, it is highly unlikely that we notice where that view took us – into the land of "fulfilling" career advancement – with an order of kids on the side.

The media portray motherhood as a part-time affair, to be balanced with the BlackBerry as one would balance a lunch meeting with the CEO, because that is precisely what we are doing. It will take a generation of new young women to form a new set of headlines – headlines we can hope reflect a less harried reality. And perhaps that is already starting.

There were two writers present in the February 2007 media review who seemed confident that having kids and caring for them was not a bad thing: Kathy Woodard, family affairs columnist for the *Western Standard*, and Jennifer McDougall at the *Calgary Herald*. McDougall wrote this on February 9, explaining her decision to have four kids: "So why did we do it? Because having multiple siblings – likewise, being parents to multiple children – is a fascinating experience that never dulls. Besides, I'm convinced that through occasional chaos and a demand for flexibility, open-minded, tolerant adults emerge. Best of all, my siblings are the best friends I'll ever have. They're the greatest gift my parents gave me."²⁷ Woodard, mother of nine, expresses constant fascination with her children's lives – it's not stress-free, yet it is meaningful. She is not trying to be Martha Stewart and Hillary Clinton at the same time, in one body. These two writers are lone voices in a harried wilderness – but positive voices for motherhood nonetheless and a basis on which to build. Motherhood may, after all, resurrect itself on its own merits, as more women rise up to take back this, the proudest of feminine, if not feminist, legacies.

READ ALL ABOUT IT! IF YOU HAVE TIME...

The mothering headlines in review

Mothers are in the media. A study of articles for a two-week period in February 2007 revealed a picture of stressed-out working moms. The following is a sample of those headlines.

OTTAWA CITIZEN, February 21: "Number of antisocial youths quadruples since 1950s: Study blames violence in media, video games." This story is based on a study showing that kids today are behaving badly – worse than in recent decades.¹ The study asserts at least in part that a lack of parental attention is to blame – we're too busy to raise our kids.

GLOBE AND MAIL, February 22: "So, how are the kids?" This article references a study showing that the number of antisocial youths has quadrupled (see headline above). The opinion piece responding to the study answers the headline question, saying, "According to Anne-Marie Ambert, [the study's lead researcher] the kids aren't all right." The author concludes: "If everything works against children except attentive, stay-at-home, well-off, non-materialistic, non-permissive, religious parents who discourage individualism, aren't overworked, don't leave their children 'with serial caretakers,' don't have 'a critical mass' of low-income neighbours and shield their children from the media that saturate their lives, modern society might as well just pull the covers over its head and give up."²

NATIONAL POST, February 21: "Family dilemma," documents the struggle of a father with work-life balance.³

PETERBOROUGH EXAMINER, February 20: "New moms agonize over returning to work."⁴

HAMILTON SPECTATOR, February 21: "When are you going to be home, Mom?" asks how parents can "comfort, discipline, guide and love through the lines of a telephone, surrounded by workmates." This story explains how to parent by telephone, opening with the following quote, "I can't really understand you, you're crying too hard. You failed your math test? It's OK. There are Oreos in the cupboard. I'll be home soon." It ends with "Tips for parenting from the office."⁵

CALGARY HERALD, February 19: "The great family experiment: Whether you see them as frazzled or liberated, the one thing certain about modern families is they're heading into uncharted territory." The article describes parents as "overworked, overtired and overextended," and concludes "No one has ever done it like we're doing it now. This is the great experiment of the modern family."⁶

CALGARY HERALD, February 15: "Families turn to nannies for child care," identifies again, the tough decision of moms who get others to care for their kids.⁷

GLOBE AND MAIL, February 14: "For today's family, time's not on their side. Hectic schedules, longer work weeks contribute to less togetherness than in 80s."⁸ The news in this story was reflective of harried souls – a Statistics Canada survey that showed workers are spending less time with family.

STARPHOENIX, February 12 wrote the headline "Culture erodes child-parent connection: psychologist" writing "Kids don't respect their elders as much as they used to."⁹

Could anyone claim to be surprised?

1 Ambert, A. (2007). The Rise in the Number of Children and Adolescents Who Exhibit Problematic Behaviors: Multiple Causes. The Vanier Institute. Retrieved online March 23, 2007 at <http://www.vifamily.ca/library/cfb/behavior.html>

2 Bailey, S. (2007, February 22). So, how are the kids? *Globe and Mail*, p. A16.

3 Waisberg, D. (2007, February 21). Family dilemma. *National Post*, p. WK1.

4 Greeno, C. (2007, February 20). New moms agonize over returning to work. *Peterborough Examiner*, p. A6.

5 Marr, L.G. (2007, February 20). "When are you going to be home, Mom?"; It's 4 p.m. at the office. Just wait for it. The phone calls from home. The kids are alone, unsupervised and in need of direction. Guilt aside, how do you comfort, discipline, guide and love through the lines of a telephone, surrounded by workmates? *Hamilton Spectator*, p. D10.

6 Heinrich Gray, K. (2007, February 19). The great family experiment. *Calgary Herald*, p. D1.

7 Frazer-Harrison, A. (2007, February 15). Families turn to nannies for child care. *Calgary Herald*, p. NA09.

8 Mahoney, J. (2007, February 14). For today's family, time's not on their side. *Globe and Mail*, p. A1.

9 Warren, J. (2007, February 12). Culture erodes child-parent connection: psychologist. *StarPhoenix*, p. A8.

endnotes

- 1 The Motherlode was organized by York University academics Andrea O'Reilly, Director of the Association for Research on Mothering, and Nancy Mandell, professor at the department of sociology. Conference agenda retrieved March 23, 2007 at <http://www.yorku.ca/arm/motherlode.html>
- 2 There are no reliable statistics on how many Canadian adults – let alone children – call themselves "transgendered."
- 3 Hymowitz, K. *Marriage and Caste in America*. (2006) Chicago: Ivan R. Dee. p. 126.
- 4 Most young women want both: We are better prepared, however for the career, not the children. Hence "...the single most profound, life-changing decision that the majority of us eventually make is the one we are now least prepared for – the act of having a child." Crittenden, D. (1999). *What our Mothers Didn't Tell Us: Why happiness eludes the modern woman*. New York: Simon and Schuster. p. 120.
- 5 First-wave feminists are usually understood to be the early feminists, those campaigning for the right to vote – the suffragettes. The second wave may include feminists of the 1960s, around the time of the sexual revolution. The third wave is the most difficult to define, but includes feminists today, the 1990s and beyond. The waves of feminism remain disputed.
- 6 Friedan, B. *The Feminine Mystique*. (1963) New York: W.W. Norton & Company Ltd.
- 7 Douglas, S. and Michaels, M. (2004). *The Mommy Myth: The idealization of motherhood and how it has undermined women*. New York: Free Press. p. 29.
- 8 *Der Spiegel* ran a cover story on working mothers, state social expenditures on family and Germany's low birth rates in February 2006 called *Der vergoldete Käfig* (The Golden Cage). The cover art featured a woman dressed in a business suit behind the bars of a golden playpen, surrounded by two children.
- 9 The author searched FPIInformart, a media search engine that compiles all of Canada's newspaper articles and many American ones. Search terms included "mother," "parents," and "parenting" among others for a two-week period in February. The results written here are an unscientific survey, but a faithful representation of the type of articles that appeared.
- 10 The media seem to prefer the term parents, even where it is clear that the interviews are largely women, or to be specific, mothers.
- 11 Kingston, A. (2007, January). The 27-year itch: The only age group in which divorce is on the rise is people over 50. Couples used to stick it out. Not anymore. *Maclean's*, p. 40. The author cites the decreasing overall divorce stats in paragraph three: "The overall divorce rate, which hovers at 38 per cent, declined 11 per cent between 1993 and 2003, the latest year for which statistics are available."
- 12 "...the new feminists like Susan Faludi and Naomi Wolf can argue, to a largely credulous press, that women are being brainwashed back into the 1950s by a male-dominated media and its female stooges..." Crittenden, D. *What Our Mothers Didn't Tell Us*. New York: Simon and Schuster. p. 20
- 13 One such article: Gallus, T. (2007, February 23). Career Shunt: A comeback mom cries foul. *The Globe and Mail*, p. c2. "... I realized I had to return to work, but little did I know that job-hunting would prove to be so humbling and difficult after five years away from the workplace. My job search began late last year, and I thought I would be working by now. I believed that my absence to have and raise children wouldn't be questioned. Instead, I feel stuck in a June Cleaver time warp," the author writes.
- 14 Friedan, B. *The Feminine Mystique*. (1963) New York: W.W. Norton & Company Ltd. p. 71.
- 15 *Ibid.* (1963) New York: W.W. Norton & Company Ltd. p. 72.
- 16 Hirshman, L. (2006). *Get to Work: A manifesto for women of the world*. New York: Viking Adult.
- 17 Hirshman, L. (2005). Homeward Bound. *American Prospect*. Retrieved online March 23, 2007 at <http://www.prospect.org/web/page.ww?section=root&name=ViewWeb&articleId=10659>
- 18 How to raise kids: Stay home or go to work? (2006, February 23). ABC News. Retrieved online March 23, 2007 at <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/AmericanFamily/story?id=1653069&page=1>
- 19 Crittenden, A. (2001). *The Price of Motherhood: Why the most important job in the World is still the least valued*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC.
- 20 *Ibid.* p. 3.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 Crittenden, D. (1999). *What our Mothers Didn't Tell Us*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- 24 *Ibid.* p.23.
- 25 D'Addio, A.C. and d'Ercole, M.M. (2005, November). *Trends and Determinants of Fertility Rates in OECD countries: The Role of Policies*. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers. p. 41. Retrieved online March 23, 2007 at <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/7/33/35304751.pdf>
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 McDougall, J. (2007, February 9). Relationships... and ah-two and ah-three and ah-four: A couple generations ago, half-a-dozen kids in one family was no biggie. These days, three's a crowd. And four? Well, that's just nutty. *Calgary Herald*, p. sw30.