

Mothers are Front Line Workers: Care and Crisis under COVID-19

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The central directive of the COVID-19 pandemic has been conveyed in two words “Stay Home”. But there has been little public discussion on how families are managing under social isolation. Few have acknowledged, let alone sought to support the crucial work mothers are doing as front line workers to keep families functioning in these times of increasing uncertainty. When I use the term “mothers,” I refer to any individual who engages in motherwork, thus the term is not limited to biological

mothers but applies anyone who does the work of mothering as a central part of their life. As studies confirm, mothers do approximately 50 to 60 percent more domestic labour and childcare than fathers; with social isolation the burden of care work has increased exponentially in both time and concern as mothers are running households with little or no support and under close to impossible conditions. This raises questions, and concerns, on how mothers are managing with these new expectations and destabilizing restraints. And, although research over the last few decades points to a decreasing gap in division of labour in the home, it does not necessarily translate to more equitable labour in the

home. What it means is that mothers are taking on less by "outsourcing" some of their load.

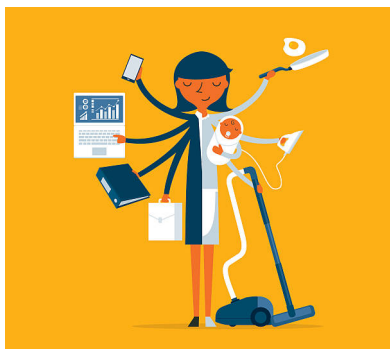
What has been particularly compounded in the pandemic is what I call the 'third shift': the emotional and intellectual labour of mother work, what philosopher Sara Ruddick has termed maternal thinking: the organizing, remembering and planning that mothers take on for the family: knowing a child's shoe size, making dentist appointments, organizing play dates or carpools, knowing how hot or cold they like their soup, remembering homework due dates, assessing their children's triggers for fatigue, health, boredom, anxiety and so on – these are examples of the emotional load

mothers carry all day, every day. This work that has not and cannot be downloaded and has increased exponentially during the pandemic, becoming more arduous with every week of social isolation.



As well many mothers are now also engaged in paid labour from home and responsible for their children's education as schools remain closed indefinitely. Mothers have little to no respite from their 24/7 days with most outdoor activity cancelled for children and with no one allowed into their homes. Add income or employment loss, financial or housing instability, single parenting, new immigrants, mothers in abusive situations, and the stress is amplified. Indeed as Dr. Nathan Stall from Sinai Health System in Toronto emphasizes: "All of us are being affected by this, but I always think it's important to recognize that women during a pandemic are really

bearing the brunt of all this and I think that should not be ignored.”



When there is no separation between work, family, home – what toll is it taking on mothers? The issue is that mothering is invisibilized; nobody sees this as work; it is just something mothers are expected to do. And, under a pandemic microenvironment, we can expect to see the pressures rise exponentially with added work, stress and anxiety. At an individual level as Helen Lewis explains in

her Atlantic article, “The Coronavirus Is a Disaster for Feminism: Pandemics affect men and women differently”, the choices of many couples over the next few months will make perfect economic sense. What do pandemic patients need? Looking after. What do self-isolating older people need? Looking after. What do children kept home from school need? Looking after. All this looking after—this unpaid caring labor—will fall more heavily on women, because of the existing structure of the workforce. “It’s not just about social norms of women performing care roles; it’s also about practicalities,”. “Who is paid less? Who has the

flexibility?” And in most households this person is the mother.



Indeed, as Andrea Flynn notes in her Ms. Op-Ed “All-Consuming: Emotional Labor Caused by Coronavirus—and Shouldered by Women,” “The coronavirus has laid bare many divisions in our society. And, like any serious crisis does, it has elevated the extent to which structural sexism permeates our lives: impacting the gendered division of labor within the home and also shaping what is possible for women, and particularly mothers, in the public sphere.”

There is more pressure on mothers now. We are expecting mothers to be educators. There is more on the to-do list and we are hearing messages on how to stimulate your child at home, and not to let them fall

behind academically, and to use this new time to do something new like learn to play an instrument. The standards are going up when they should be completely relaxed.



Indeed, as Helen Lewis writes in her Atlantic article:

“Enough already. When people try to be cheerful about social distancing and working from home, noting that

William Shakespeare and Isaac Newton did some of their best work while England was ravaged by the plague, there is an obvious response: Neither of them had child-care responsibilities. Shakespeare spent most of his career in London, where the theaters were, while his family lived in Stratford-upon-Avon. During the plague of 1606, the playwright was lucky to be spared from the epidemic—his landlady died at the height of the outbreak—and his wife and two adult daughters stayed safely in the Warwickshire countryside. Newton, meanwhile, never married or had children. He saw out the Great Plague of 1665–6 on his family's estate in the east of England and spent most of his adult life as a

fellow at Cambridge University, where his meals and housekeeping were provided by the college.”

We must recognize and support mothers as front line workers to recognize and appreciate what mothers are facing and accomplishing in the home and under unimaginable circumstances. We are rightly honoring the essential services of many in the public service who are keeping us safe and cared for: doctors, nurses, first responders, truck drivers, retail workers, cleaners, but no one to my knowledge has publicly thanked mothers: no one has acknowledged let alone honoured the essential work mothers are doing in our homes that are keeping families safe and cared for. The question must be: Why is

that? The pandemic has also resulted in greater appreciation for the work of many that was little valued and poorly paid pre-pandemic such as PSWs, retail workers etc., with a call for increased wages and respect. But again no one is saying the same for mothers and mother work. Why are we not recognizing and doing the same for mothers and mother work? Why are people not asking: 'How are the mothers coping?' What can we do for families? Why are we not asking these questions? Why is our government only talking about and providing support for waged work? And not care work? These are important and necessary questions to ask now and to learn from. Sadly, despite the hugely life-altering changes

of the pandemic; one thing remains unchanged; mother work remains invisibilized, devalued, and taken for granted.

How can we provide help for mothers? The first thing is to create a safe space where mothers can talk about what they are experiencing. Whether it is on the phone, through video chat or social media, we should be open to hearing and listening to mothers' stories. And we need immediately to develop social policy and research to support mothers and their essential work of caregiving.

As Claire Gagne wonders in her article “Why is no one talking about how unsustainable this is for working parents? What’s the solution? I don’t know. But I think as

parents we need to start demanding some sort of plan.

Maybe Justin Trudeau could implore companies to reduce workloads for parents, while keeping full-time salaries? Or offer a salary guarantee, similar to the wage subsidy, for parents who choose to take a leave of absence to take care of their kids? Offer guidelines for how to safely set up small neighbourhood daycares or childcare swaps? Because one thing is certain—even as the current headlines begin to talk about the economy slowly coming to life, parents' lives won't go back to normal until we get our village back.”

Indeed, now more than ever we must recognize and support the care work mothers perform to sustain our

families and our communities. And it is time to finally ask and address why motherwork, even during times of a pandemic when it is so crucial remains so devalued and invisibilized. It is time to name motherwork for what it is: an essential service and to proclaim that mothers are indeed front line workers in this pandemic, deserving of the same appreciation and support.

#mothersarefrontlineworkers