

Speech about motherhood report

Given by Sally Gimson at the FPI "modern motherhood" seminar on 02 July 2008

As we have heard motherhood is a huge emotional experience for women. We want to look at policy and how policymakers have grappled with the issue.

It is interesting that in the outline of the new Equality Bill that was published last week, mothers were not mentioned once. Women's pay was addressed without the mention that it is often not so much femaleness that confers disadvantage but motherhood.

We have over the last few years rather airbrushed mothers from the policy discussion. We have talked about parents and about fathers, but not about mothers. In fact dare I say so, mothers have become rather unfashionable - I hope this conference will change this!

Talking about parents of course -and we are the Family and Parenting Institute after all - was a way of equalising the relationships: saying that mothers and fathers are both parents and so equally responsible for children. But it has led to nonsenses. Parenting classes are most often mothering classes (except for special classes for "dads"). Parenting orders are effectively mothering orders and most school's parent teacher associations are nothing of the kind - they are predominantly mother teacher associations.

But my contention is that so much talk of parents in policy has stopped us thinking clearly about what being a mother really means and so had the unintentional effect of short-changing mothers.

Motherhood means actually bearing a baby, going through childbirth and then ideally breastfeeding a baby. It means a physically changing body and a changing identity. It means being responsible (in a different way to fathers) for a very long time.

Women nowadays underestimate motherhood. We assume - unlike our mothers- that we are equal with men. We beat them in exams. We get as good jobs as them after university or college. Our partners treat us as equals and talk to us as equals. Right up to the point when we have a baby. And then it changes. We are hobbled - and probably hobbled for life. It is not surprising that the shock is profound.

And yet women find themselves nowadays almost without support after birth. Health visitors are being withdrawn because children birth is "natural" for most mothers. Their partners get two weeks off maximum to look after them (if they take it!) and then they are alone. Only the very needy or those whose behaviour the state hopes the change get help, for instance teenage mothers.

The expectation is that mothers will just get on with it, pull themselves together and go back to work and make complicated (or prohibitively expensive childcare arrangements). That is what ultimately the state expects them to do.

And yet all this conflicts with some of the deepest feelings a mother has after birth and also what health experts are saying: wanting to breast feed for instance. How can you breast feed if you go back to work? Should you feel guilty if you do not? It must be no coincidence that breastfeeding rates are stubbornly low.

The question that vexes most women when they have a baby is: is motherhood about staying at home and looking after children (and reading to them and feeding them healthy food and parenting them (actively) as you are supposed to) or is it about work so you can buy the best things for your baby and pay the mortgage often calculated on two salaries.

Or is it -which most mothers decide in the end I suppose - about trying to do both and feeling you do neither very well.

What we forget perhaps is that the early stages of motherhood are only temporarily incapacitating - that mothers may not return to full-time work but their productivity quickly gets up to almost normal by the time a child is one or two.

But for many mothers it becomes a question of how to look after children and work when part-time work is so badly paid and when career choices are limited for people who work part-time. Why does your partner - who used to help, when you both worked full time - now expect you to do everything -because you spend two or three days a week at home. Can you really negotiate anything with him when he arrives back tired from work? And why does everyone at work expect you to take on a less responsible position now that you have started a family?

The state has tried to help women grapple with some of these problems. It is easy to berate the state and forget what has changed. That the penalties of motherhood seem so unfair is largely because expectations have been raised.

But work has been the predominant driver in the last ten years- the state has implemented policies which help mothers go back to work, if anything to stop lone parents or rather mothers living in poverty, as well as to support couples. Mothers have more maternity rights, for longer. There is paid maternity leave (and some businesses top up the governments £117 a week). There is more childcare around - though fulltime nursery care is still very very expensive. Parental leave has been introduced and the possibility of sharing leave with fathers. Billions of pounds have been paid to families in tax credits. Flexible working, which has mainly benefited women, is now parent's right to ask for if she has a child under six and it will be extended to parents with children under 16.

The problem is that not enough attention is paid to what kind of work and how women work. It is work at any price. We send out the signal that the act of going out and earning money is morally more justified than looking after a child at home.

At yet at the same time we have become excessively anxious about parenting, how to do it, how to do it right. How to do it perfectly even? That is a middle class obsession perhaps, but one that is passed to parents or rather mothers whose children misbehave at school, who hang around in gangs as teenagers, especially as evidence grows that parenting is so important for outcomes.

I am not arguing that women should stay at home and look after the kids and not work.

But I am saying that the penalty mothers pay is unfair, that we should look more carefully about the roles that women and men play in the family and whether there should be policies that look at how these roles can be challenged to help life for mothers and perhaps even help their couple relationship.

Is there a wage mothers should aim at to keep themselves and their children out of poverty? Do mothers need a roadmap which shows them how to have children, bring them up properly and not fall off the career ladder - Sure Start and parenting classes are only partial solutions to these questions and address their children's need first.

You may now accuse me of saying that mothers need to "have it all". I am not sure this is about "having it all". It is about fairness.

And that's why none of this is possible without fathers. We need to be looking at policies which directly address fathers' relationships with their children and partners -rather than just see fathers as the main breadwinners who are there to provide financial support. One possible solution is the "daddy month" in Scandinavia or the even more stringent paternity leave in Iceland. This leave is specifically reserved for fathers which means men may be equally likely to take time off to look after their children and so are as potentially equally disadvantaged in the workplace.

It is not that men do not want to do these things. Most surveys that we have done tell us that men want to spend more time with their family and can't. And that men work more long hours when they have children and don't want to.

And so this is why as part of our recommendations we want five things –a “daddy month” which is reserved for fathers’ leave, more health visitors to support women through the profound changes of motherhood (and which help men to support women through these changes), flexible working -which is a right for both parents -not just the right to request it as at present (something that parents have told us the value much above more childcare) and maternity pay which is above the current £117 and pegged to the minimum wage. Finally changes to part-time pay particularly in caring work so that it is paid at a much higher rate than it is at present.

It is fundamental to address these questions, because ultimately these are ones of equality. Women are equal to men. Mothers are equal to fathers. The physical incapacity of motherhood while profound is only temporary. Mothers should share power with fathers in a more equal way -in the home and in public life. While childbirth hobbles mothers so badly they will never be able to do that.