Paul Campbell

Motherwork: More than a Labour of Love

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Extraits de la section mère-fille d'une étude sur le travail de maison chez trois générations de femmes de Flin Flon au Manitoba.

The following is an excerpt from More Than A Labour of Love*, *a study of three generations of housewives in Flin Flon, a mining town in northern Manitoba. The book argues that there is a major contradiction in women's work in the home: it is work and it is not work. Based in marriage and parenting, it is unpaid and is done in the private family home. For most workers there is a distinct separation between workplace and home, between co-workers and family. For the housewife, these are all inseparable and intertwined. Because the people she works for are not employers, but her husband and children, her work is bound up with the most intense and important interpersonal relationships of her life. This section focusses on what it is to be a mother and what is involved in raising children in industrial capitalist society.*

Child care, particularly when children are young, is very demanding and constant work. Unlike all other components of domestic work, its production time is twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Even when children are sleeping or playing away from home, the mother is always responsible. Such a commitment of attention and awareness can never be contracted or made more flexible.

While the time involved in caring for any one child cannot be reduced, it is clear that over three generations, the proportion of a woman's life consumed with child bearing and rearing has been reduced considerably. With fewer children and a decline in infant mortality, the potential exists for a mother's relationship with her children to increase in intensity.

This intensification of the relationship between mothers and their children has emerged as a result of two developments outside of the home. Improvements in the consumer goods sector altered housework, freeing a certain amount of women's labour time. Simultaneously, various scientific acquisitions, particularly the persuasive Freudian insight that the first five years are critical to the development of a child's character, called for a reassessment of the necessary qualities and characteristics of people who care for children.

As women became aware of new developments in the scientific understanding of human development and as they began to apply the resulting theories about mothering, the amount of time and energy they spent in caring for their young children increased. A great-grandmother reflecting on three generations of child rearing commented on the changing patterns that she had observed:

> Well, babies, they're a bit tough to figure. When mine were wee we figured all they needed was feeding and a bit of loving now and again. I left mine to

*Meg Luxton, *More Than A Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women's Work in the Home* (Toronto: Women's Press, forthcoming, Spring 1980).

sleep most of the time for the first year. But my daughter, her babies were born in the 1940s and she was all modern and they were on a schedule so she fed them when the book said, and she took them for a walk when the book said, and bathed them and talked and played with them, all when the book said. She spent more time with them than I did but it seemed odd to me. And now my granddaughter has a wee one and she thinks it needs all sorts of attention. She says babies need talking to and music and she has hers sit on the table with her and that baby's never alone except at night. And the baby seems to thrive on it but her mother's never alone and gets no peace.

(Generation I, b. 1893, with three children b. 1912, 1914, 1924)[1]

Reconstructing child-rearing patterns on the basis of people's recollections shows that in the early period infants were excluded from many social activities because they were expected to sleep for the greater part of the day. Nowadays infants are included in many more activities and are expected to be more active. This changing pattern of child care is illustrated more clearly in the child-rearing practices relevant to slightly older children.

From the time children have learned to walk and talk until they are ready to start school, they are still sufficiently inexperienced that they must be supervised constantly. During this period they learn a variety of essential social skills like talking, and satisfying their own physical needs by dressing themselves, eating, and amusing themselves. The changes in the patterns of child care flow out of changes in the physical and social environment of the household.

As the community, and more importantly, the household are the loci of domestic work, the level of municipal development and household technology are significant factors in the organization of motherwork. Women who moved to Flin Flon during the period of settlement encountered numerous problems with child rearing in primitive conditions.

One woman who moved to Flin Flon in 1926 when it was a bush camp, lived in a tent for the first five years she was there. For four consecutive winters she gave birth to a baby in her 10' by 14' tent in temperatures that stayed around -45°F for four months. She recalled her last winter there:

> It was the winter of 1930 and we were still in that tent and I had the fourth baby and then there were four wee ones and me cooped up in that tent. Well I tell you I did what some Indian women used to do. I tied the babies up in a papoose. It kept them warm and safe and out of mischief. You know when we moved into the house we built and I could let them crawl around, well at first they was so used to staying put that they was afraid to go far. But well, I couldn't risk them running loose in that tent now. When I think of how we lived, me with four babies! Well!!
>
> (Generation I, b. 1894)

Because small children must be supervised, mothers are frequently victims of the 'captive wife' syndrome,[2] that is, mothers with young children often find themselves housebound and socially isolated. In the early period in Flin Flon this isolation was compounded by the primitive conditions of life in the new town.

Women who migrated into the community were socially isolated. Their husbands worked long hours six or seven days a week. Initially there were no support networks of kin or friends to help out or exchange child care services.

Women were also physically isolated. The streets were just cleared spaces between the buildings—muskeg that froze into rough uneven surfaces in winter and thawed in spring, becoming oozing, clinging mud. Main Street, and then a few side streets close to it, were the only streets with sidewalks and initially these were wooden planks. The sewer was open and ran alongside the boardwalk. Dogs ran in packs and mingled with the teams of huskies brought in by the trappers. Crowds of rowdy men gathered on the sidewalks and quarrels and fights were frequent.

These conditions made it difficult for women with small children to move about the town. Several older women recalled the hardships imposed upon them by the inadequate streets and sidewalks. If a woman had more than one small child it was almost impossible for her to get out of the house. Unless she lived on Main Street there were no sidewalks and the mud was too difficult and too dangerous for carriages and small children. One woman recalled her first five months in Flin Flon in 1930:

> I arrived here in this house in August of 1930 and I never saw Main Street [which is one block away] until Christmas time in December. I was five months never outside that house. But he was working sixteen hours six days each week and there was mud all around so I never went out. I never ever had a babysitter—weren't no one around to do it. When things froze he built a sleigh and I put the three kids on it and went uptown to see the Christmas stuff in the stores.
>
> (Generation I, b. 1894)

Early housing was primitive and it affected women's work as mothers in a variety of ways. Generally the rugged housing conditions made child care difficult but sometimes it created bizarre and unusual incidents:

> I remember when we first came north and were living in our cabin—the first place we lived. There was just one wood stove and the cabin was cold that winter. One day I set the baby on the floor while I had to do something else. She peed and her diaper froze, stuck to the floor.
>
> (Generation I, b. 1897)

The pre-mechanized household was often hazardous for children, especially the range, which was constantly hot, the open water cisterns into which children occasionally fell, and the wood floors, which splintered easily. Chamber pots, water pots and indoor woodpiles were tempting playthings for children. A mother of three children under ten in 1931 described her house:

> Seems like there was always some trouble happening with those kids. Billy were burnt something fierce on that stove once; then he learnt never to go near it again but the others, they just never learnt though they never got hurt so bad. We kept the tweezers on a nail by the sink cause someone always had a sliver somewhere what needed taking out. Then when I wasn't afraid of them getting into the water cistern and drowning, they was making a mess in the woodpile.
>
> (Generation I, b. 1898)

Most women recalled child rearing in early Flin Flon as totally incompatible with the requirements of housework.

> I just couldn't do both you know. Either I looked after them kids or I did my housework.
>
> (Generation I, b. 1891)

But the same woman continued by pointing out that however incompatible they might be, she still had to do both.

> But I didn't have that choice you know. The kids were there and I had to look after them and the housework sure never left, so I learned to do both. And at the same time too.

The tensions between the requirements of her two jobs made domestic work

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unpleasant. It also motivated women to try to change the circumstances of their work. One solution was to put the children outside while the woman did her housework. A woman with infant twins in 1930 wrapped the children up warmly and left them outside in their pram all day, only bringing them in to feed them.

> Every morning after I nursed them I'd just wrap them up and pop them outside in the carriage while I did my work. People said they would freeze but they never.
>
> (Generation I, b. 1895)

For those with infants who stayed put, this solution frequently eased the situation. For those with mobile youngsters who required supervision it was no solution.

> When the kids were little, three or four, I used to go nuts with them around my feet while I was doing housework so I'd put them outside but all the time I'd worry for fear they'd fall down the rocks into the lake and drown or slip on the ice in the winter and crack themselves on the rock so all the while I'd be straining to hear them and then I'd get so's I couldn't stand the tension so I'd bring them in, then I'd be afraid they'd hurt themselves in the house. It was just awful.
>
> (Generation I, b. 1900)

In large cities it has become more and more difficult to leave small children unsupervised because of the increasingly hostile environment of urban centres where the traffic, strangers and the vastness of the city threaten young children. This is less true in places like Flin Flon, where the traffic is still on a small scale and where even in the uptown area someone is likely to know where a particular child lives. As the town developed, roads were laid, sidewalks installed and parks created, and it gradually became a safer place for children. One mother described the impact of sidewalks on her work.

> We lived on Hill Street [one block east of Main] and Sue [aged seven] went to the school in the hospital parking lot [one block west of Main—three blocks from her house.] Well the mud was so bad I used to get up every morning and dress the baby and I'd walk with the baby and Sue down to Main Street til she got to the sidewalk. Then me and the baby would come back home. When my husband and a neighbour got some boards they laid a walk from our house to the Main Street sidewalk. Then I didn't need to go with her and I could let the baby sleep longer. It made things easier.
>
> (Generation I, b. 1898)

Another woman commented on the changes in her work caused by the development of a playground near her house.

> Well you've no idea what a relief that playground was when they put it in. Before that the children played on the rocks and I worried for fear one of them would drown but after the park went in, I just told them they were to play in the park and nowhere else and then I knew they were safe and I could find them when I wanted to.
>
> (Generation I, b. 1902)

As the municipal infrastructure developed, women with small children found it easier to move about the town using push carts or sleds. This helped to break down the isolation many of them experienced. The safer physical environment made it easier for them to let their small children play outside. However, neither of these changes resolved the problem of time-consuming, labour-intensive housework.

A solution for those who could afford it was to expand and improve their house. One woman described changes they made to their house around 1930.

> That house had two bedrooms and a medium-sized other room. But with three small children who soon began learning to walk it was impossible. So we built a kitchen onto our house so I could put the children to play in the living room and block the door into the kitchen with a door so I could wash and get it as wet as I liked and not have to worry about those children getting into everything.
>
> (Generation I, b. 1899)

Other women with older children, especially girls, sometimes made them responsible for the younger children. Although classes started for school-aged children soon after the first families moved to Flin Flon, formal schooling did not get well established until the early 1930s and even then some women kept their children home.

> When the last one was born I had three little ones at home with me and the four older ones at school. So I told Sally (then aged 10) that she could stay home and help out. She stayed home for two years til all but the baby were ready for school. Sally were a big help to me.
>
> (Generation I, b. 1895)

Whatever solutions women attempted, the demands of housework under primitive conditions meant that there was not a great deal of time available for child care. Women organized the care of their children so that they could have lengthy periods of uninterrupted time to do housework.

With the increase and reorganization of space in the household women were able to do housework in one area while children played in another. Decreasing household hazards also enabled children to play inside but away from immediate observation.

> Once we'd extended the house the children had their own room so they could play there while I did my housework. Sometimes I'd even run out to the store leaving them for a few minutes all alone. Sometimes I worried but it seemed safe enough what with the new stove and all.
>
> (Generation II, b. 1931)

As housework gradually became less demanding women were able to incorporate their care of young children into their housework and simultaneously take time out from housework to spend with their children.

One woman, born in 1929, had three children born in 1946, 1947 and 1949. Twenty years later she had a 'second family,' two children born in 1967 and 1969. When the first children were born, in the 1940s, she lived in a primitive three-room house with an electric stove but no running water. By the 1960s her house was fully modernized. She compared these two experiences and noted how her changed material circumstances had affected her child care.

> With the first three I had so much work to do around my house I barely spent time with them during the day, just at night I'd play with them. But now with these two, my housework wasn't so demanding so I spent lots more time with them especially when they were babies—talking to them, teaching them. You wouldn't think that having an electric stove and modern kitchen would affect the way you treat your babies would you? But it sure does.
>
> (Generation II, b. 1929)

Women with infants in the 1970s frequently sat their babies on the kitchen counter or table while they were working. The child was thus at eye level with events and other people. High chairs, jolly jumpers, walkers, portable playpens and plastic infant seats all geared to different stages of development in the young child facilitated close observation of young children with housework.

These changing patterns of child care are reflected in two aspects of the ideology of mother work: the changing theories that women have about young children and the changing ideas they have about what mothering should include. In the early period women generally assumed that all their young children required was care and lots of love. The babies could be left alone and they would flourish.

> Children need care and guidance and love. Then they grow up and learn at their own pace.
>
> (Generation I, b. 1900)

Compatible with this was a theory of mothering which held that mothers should care for and love their small children but that their responsibility did not include teaching.

In the more recent period, women assumed that even very small babies needed regular emotional, sensual and intellectual stimulation and that it was primarily their responsibility to provide this. Young mothers frequently agonized over whether or not they were 'doing a good job' with their small children. As a result they spent a great deal of time with their pre-school age children, playing, talking, reading and generally worrying over them.

The impact of these types of changes on women's work has been primarily to bind women even more tightly to their young children. When asked how much time they spent with their young children, women unanimously responded with 'twenty-four hours each day every day.' When groups of mothers with young children got together, their discussion inevitably revolved around their ambiguous feelings about their work as mothers. They liked their children, enjoyed their company and delighted in watching and helping them grow. Yet they felt trapped by the complete dependency of their children and by their own sense of total responsibility.

Their conversations were full of comments that reflected the intensity of their work. Numerous activities ceased when children were born, not to be resumed until the children reached school-age.

> I used to work at the bank full-time and I did sports and all sorts of social activities. Since I had the kids I haven't done anything. I just stay home with them all the time.
>
> (Generation III, b. 1950)

> I know that when my children are small they need me. But sometimes I think I'll go nuts if I don't get out of this house and meet some grown-ups. I find I'm starting to talk like a three-year-old all the time now.
>
> (Generation III, b. 1952)

The comments also reflected the ambiguity of their work.

> I feel like I'm going mad, stuck with these kids. I mean I really love them and I'm glad we have them but I'll be glad when they're off to school.
>
> (Generation III, b. 1954)

One of the features which makes this period of child caring tolerable is that women know that once their children begin school they will be freer to resume a more independent and active lifestyle.

> It's hell now but I know it will only last two more years. As soon as the youngest starts school, I'm going to go back to work.
>
> (Generation III, b. 1960)

Legally children must begin school at age six and cannot leave until they turn sixteen. During those ten years mothers continue to be responsible for socializing their children but increasingly the school system, the peer group and the children themselves take over more and more of this aspect of children's development. Through the school-age period children become increasingly independent and motherwork gradually decreases. The mother's work is transformed from physi-

cal caring to socialization to managing interpersonal relations. It becomes less physically demanding but in many ways, more emotionally and psychologically demanding.

At some point her children begin to leave home and eventually the last child leaves for good. Because child bearing and rearing are such intense and all-consuming occupations, when the work ends, many women experience a period of profound shock which has been referred to as 'the empty nest syndrome.'[3] Given the strength of the myth of motherhood in women's lives, their self-identity, often their main reason for existing, is bound up in their children. When the children leave, the women are often at loose ends. The other aspects of their domestic work seem somehow irrelevant.

> I used to cook and clean for eight of us and now there's only two so what's the point? It was the children who made my work worthwhile.
> (Generation II, b. 1925)

In many ways this period in a woman's life is comparable to retirement for men. Everything that she has done on a daily basis for at least sixteen years suddenly changes. A major component of her work ceases. What distinguishes women's domestic work from men's wage work is that in fact, she does not retire. The child bearing and rearing component of domestic work may end, but the rest of it continues.

These shifts in mothering are closely related to shifts in the other components of domestic work. Improvements in domestic technology transformed the labour process of housework, reducing the amount of necessary labour time and making its organization more flexible. As a result, it was possible for child care to expand. As both housework and child care were reorganized, it became increasingly possible for women to move into wage work.

These shifts and reallocations of women's labour time have not necessarily occurred smoothly or easily. The increasing intensity of child care and the importance placed upon it have created new sources of frustration and anxiety for the mother. The demands of child care continue to conflict with the demands of the other aspects of women's domestic labour.

Notes

1. Generation I refers to women who set up households in Flin Flon between 1925 and 1939; Generation II set up households between 1940 and 1959 and Generation III between 1960 and 1977.

2. H. Gavron, *The Captive Wife* (London: Penguin, 1966).

3. P. Bart, 'Depression in Middle-Aged Women,' in V. Gornick and B. Moran, eds., *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness* (New York: Basic Books, 1971).

Laura Jones

Cooperative Preschool Associations

Apprenticeship for What?

JUDITH SALES

Une mère met en question la 'valeur marchande' de son travail dans une association pré-scolaire.

Why couldn't I be the perfect mother? I met all of Statistics Canada's requirements: I had a son and a daughter, lived in a split level house with a 9-5 husband and a conventional mortgage, sandbox and dog. If the statistics people were to be believed, the only thing I was lacking was the .4 of a child, but that I was willing to give to someone who had a .6!

I considered myself a professional woman. I had attended university, travelled, taught in England and Canada, had postponed maternity for years after marriage. I had prepared myself mentally as well as physically to stay at home and be a Super Mom. How then could I explain what three years of motherhood had done to my self-confidence and emotions? It seemed cowardice to admit that I was bored with domesticity, that I was finding soap operas exciting or that my bedside table was piled high with child-rearing books and Harlequin romances. (The ones that had a cook and a maid were especially appealing.)

While I was a working woman, I could never understand my friends with children. Not for me, those hours of exchanging child-rearing anecdotes. I vowed my child and I would spend happy hours in stimulating play. After children, that vow, along with 'my child will never eat candy' and 'my child will never throw a tantrum' went quickly out the window.

When I first heard about cooperative preschools I was delighted. I listened to all the advantages of co-ops: of children playing with peers and parents supporting each other, and of the advantages of educational programs, but none of them for me, measured up to the two and a half hours of free time they gave me twice a week. It looked as if there would be lots of things for my child to do. And the supervisor seemed very pleasant, the other children friendly, so I enrolled my son.

An orientation meeting for the parents (mainly mothers) in my son's new class surprised me. Here I found other women who were having almost exactly the same problems as I was. They too had had to make major adjustments in their lifestyle.