

# Motherhood: A Milestone or a Millstone?

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J.A. Lessard, Hull 1913, Archives Publiques du Canada

Cet article parle à toutes les femmes qui sont restées chez elles pendant quinze ans, faisant leur "devoir", et qui, une fois à la recherche du travail à l'extérieur de la maison, se voient refuser des emplois dans leur spécialisation parce qu'elles "n'ont rien fait" durant quinze ans.

'I see you haven't worked for the last fourteen years,' he said. 'Yes, that's right,' I replied. He sat there across the desk from me; one of the important people in the local Board of Education. I was there for an interview, in the hope of getting a job teaching history. We had already gone over the earlier part of my application form. We had discussed my qualifications, both academic and professional, and my past experience, and had just come to the place where it read 'jobs previously held', and he was referring to the last entry, '1958-1972: housewife and mother'. 'I see you haven't worked for the last fourteen years,' he said, and I sat there and agreed with him, feeling all too deeply the inadequacy of my situation.

That interview was my last, though by no means my first attempt to return to my profession; a profession for which I had trained for many years, and in which I had operated very happily, and I believe competently. He had gone on to explain that my chances of getting a job in the area were practically nil. I was too expensive for what I had to offer. First, I was overqualified with an honours degree, and secondly I would have to be paid on a scale allowing for my previous experience. Both the degree and the experience, normally considered assets, were worth almost nothing after such a long period of inactivity. The Board had a list of newly qualified graduates looking for teaching posts, and not only were they cheaper, they were probably a better bet in terms of competence for the job, being fresh from their training.

I admit that in 1972 there was a waiting list of young teachers. I admit I would have been expensive. What I contest now is his automatic assumption that my worth to the profession had done nothing but diminish over the past fourteen years. And I would contest a like assumption made by any employer in any profession, in a like situation. At least my interviewer was honest. At least he had the courage to say what so many others had only hinted at. He suggested I should either look for other types of employment, or, if I was really determined to teach, I should be prepared to move to an area where there was a shortage. 'I can't do that because of family commitments,' I said, and he smiled kindly, shrugging his shoulders, and agreed

I had a problem. We parted on the best of terms, shaking hands, as he wished me luck in finding something congenial.

I did start looking into other areas, and eventually did find a job in a field totally unrelated to the teaching of history. I found this job after a conversation I had at a party with a doctor whom I had just met. I had bemoaned my fruitless search for employment. A couple of days later he phoned to say he knew of someone who was looking for a research technician in the Cardio-Respiratory Department of the local hospital. On my protestations that I knew absolutely nothing about either the heart or the lungs, except that I had heard they were necessary for a successful life, he said, 'That's OK. If you can get a degree, teach high school, and raise four kids, I am sure you can learn anything; that is, if you want to.' Yes, I wanted to, and I did. His sort are rare.

After five years happily employed, I can tell the above story and laugh, but I shouldn't laugh, because that story is relevant not only to me but to countless other women, who found, find, and will find themselves trying to resume a career after time spent at home. I am concerned about two main issues. The first is the obvious one. Too many employers assume, not only that a woman who has devoted several years to her family has not progressed, but that she has actually regressed in her potential and capability. The second is even more frightening. That is, women themselves too often accept this judgement as valid, and regard themselves as inferior in the job market compared with those who have pursued full-time careers. Even as I write this, I am angry with myself for what I have just written. What is raising a family and running a home, if not a full-time career? Yet we unconsciously accept the idea that such jobs are somehow 'different' and are at least irrelevant, at most damaging, to any chance of success in finding future employment. Why do we allow our motherhood to hang like millstones around our necks? What I should have done when told that I was a poor risk because I 'hadn't worked for fourteen years' was to have shot the man. No, that would have perhaps been an overreaction, but what I should not have done was what I did; sit there meekly accepting my inadequacy as my due.

When I started a family, I made a conscious decision to stay home and look after my children myself. I felt, despite youthful fantasies of at least winning a Nobel Prize, that this in all honesty would be the most important thing I would do in my

life. If raising human beings is not important, then I find it hard to think of what is. There are many who have made the same decision. It is regrettable that such a decision should lead to the danger of being stigmatized in the eyes of future possible employers.

I believe that the potential for learning and developing during time spent organizing a household and raising a family is as high as in any other career. The many activities associated with those roles are well known, and are often given lip-service, but—at the risk of being boring—they include nursing, teaching, cooking, chauffeuring, entertaining, accountancy, and the practice of child psychology, to name but a few. And, impressive as such a list may sound, the real accomplishment is learning to do them all at the same time. One also learns to accept responsibility and make decisions alone. For instance, when the youngest child falls and needs stitches, just five minutes before it is time to fetch another child from kindergarten, there is no time to call a committee meeting to decide what should be done. Of course I admit that there must often be

skills to learn or relearn with regard to any specific career after an absence from that career, but the ability to do so must surely be enhanced rather than diminished by years spent managing a household.

I would like to see women carry their years of full-time motherhood into the job market with more pride, and to see it accepted as worthy of such pride. I would like to see, as the first reference on a job application, the principal of the school that the applicant's children attend, in the hope that the following might be written. 'I can say from the result of her work that Mrs X has done an excellent job over the last X years. Her children are well behaved, well adjusted, popular with both their peers and the teachers, and I am sure will grow to be worthwhile members of the community. I am sure from such evidence of competence that Mrs X will be an asset to any job she might be given.' I wonder if such a reference has ever been asked for, and if not, why not?



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