

Moms in Politics: Work is Work

The growing number of women parliamentarians in this country, among others, has prompted scholars to explore political workplaces through a gendered lens. Are legislatures meeting the needs of these parliamentarians and are there barriers to participation? The authors of this article examine these questions with a particular focus on work-life balance and parenthood. While questions of work-life balance affect all parliamentarians, parents raising young children – for whom women have historically assumed greater responsibility – have particular demands on their time. The authors survey recent scholarly research on women and the political workplace and find that while state support for working families appears to be valued around the world, changes to institutions and policies that would facilitate women’s and mothers’ political work, and especially their political careers, have not kept pace. The authors conclude we must rethink the way we “do” politics in order to ensure that this unique workplace is accessible for individuals across all walks of life, and at all stages of family life.

Amanda Bittner and Melanee Thomas

Political moms have always captured our attention. From Margaret Thatcher’s assertion after her maiden speech that she could not take on more responsibility until her children were older,¹ to public interest in Julia Gillard’s decision not to have

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children,² women in politics’ parental status easily makes the news. Even though she was not elected herself, Michelle Obama’s role as a mother was raised in relation to Sasha Obama’s absence from her father’s farewell speech in January 2017. Sasha had an exam the next morning, stayed home to study, and this was seen by some as proof of Michelle’s focus on parenting. Twitter was full of comments like that seen here:



K
@KadijahChloee

Y'all asking "Where is Sasha" like it's not a school night and Michelle ain't a black mama.

2017-01-10, 11:44 PM

5,898 RETWEETS 9,312 LIKES



While the role of the First Lady (or Prime Minister’s wife, in the case of Sophie Grégoire) is not the same as the role of, say Secretary of State or Minister of the Environment (in the Canadian context), a similar focus on the compatibility of motherhood and political jobs can be seen globally. Anne Marie Slaughter infamously quit her highly demanding job in politics for another demanding job in academia, citing the former’s inflexible work schedule as not conducive to being both a parent and a Director of Policy Planning at the State



A Message To My Younger Self

Linda Reid
MLA for Richmond South Centre (British Columbia)

The world belongs to those who show up. Make sure you do! Go forward with no regrets. It sure beats “snap out of it.” If you want a stronger community it will be because

you effectively resourced young parents and their children. You do want to strengthen community. Continue to believe that public service is the rent we pay for our time on this earth and you will be fine.

Department.³ In Canada, Minister of the Environment Catherine McKenna made waves when she stated she intended to turn her phone off every evening so she could spend time with her family during supper time.⁴

This issue of “balancing” work and family responsibilities is not new. Indeed, if you enter “work-life balance” into a search engine, you get nearly 10 million hits. There is good reason for this. According to Statistics Canada, the proportion of mothers with partners who work full-time is about 58 per cent. Among single-parent mothers, this number increases further to nearly 78 per cent.⁵ These numbers are on par with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average, recently placed at about 70 per cent.⁶ Put simply, moms around the world work, often both in the home and outside of it, and they have been working for quite some time.

What **is** a more recent phenomenon is that of moms doing *political* work in legislatures: the current average number of *women* in parliaments is at about 23 per cent globally.⁷ Of these, we do not know the number of mothers versus non-mothers, but we can safely assume that the proportion of mothers to women is not 1:1. That women are a small but growing population in elected politics, and that mothers are a proportion of that small but growing population, suggests that there is an increasing need to look at the *political* workplace to determine whether it is meeting the needs of its employees (including both mothers and fathers), and

in particular, whether there are (gendered) barriers to parents’ participation. This article argues that despite some progress, considerable work still needs to be done to ensure that electoral politics a) are conducive to work-life balance for parents; and b) do not present additional barriers to the participation of some parts of the population, notably mothers, over others.

Accommodating/Facilitating Parenthood? The Demands of the Political Job

Recent research⁸ suggests that parenthood and political careers are difficult to balance, and especially so for women. Legislative rules and norms often throw up barriers that surpass those in a “normal” work place.

Barbara Arneil⁹ assesses legislative rules across three countries (Canada, Britain, and Australia), and finds that there are a number of factors making the legislative job particularly difficult for mothers with infants while in office. She points to the challenging choices political mothers face that other working mothers in Canada do not experience. Being elected for only a few years at a time, for example, leaves legislators unwilling to take a maternity leave in the way that they might if they were working in other job sectors. Given that re-election (if desired) will be based partially on performance while in office, it is difficult to take a year (or even a few months) off to take care of an infant. Indeed, if the controversy surrounding Catherine McKenna’s desire to turn her phone off for a few hours each evening tells



Diane Lamarre
MNA for Taillon (Quebec)

A Message To My Younger Self

Diane, what convinced you to take the leap into politics? Are you happy?

The telephone rang, and Pauline Marois, the first woman premier of Quebec, asked to speak with me. I had a lot to lose if I ran for office. I thought again about the women who inspired me: first, my mother, who taught me about the value of hard work and integrity. I thought of Zahida, my colleague in humanitarian assistance in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where we worked on health care reform after the war. I thought of Janine Matte, the first woman president of the Quebec college of pharmacists. I was the second woman president in 140 years. I had never dreamed of a political career, but I had always wanted to serve Quebec and my fellow citizens. The lack of access to health care made me angry.

All of a sudden, everything fell into place, and I was led to this ultimate commitment. I would have enemies, which was not something I was used to, but I would have a voice—one of 125—to bring my constituents’ needs to the highest levels. And that privilege is priceless. I would be a respectful combatant in the political arena. And yes, I’m happy!

us anything, it is that Canadians have expectations of politicians being “always on, always available” in a way that is certainly not the case in so-called “normal” jobs. This is certainly challenging for fathers too, and for non-parents, but it presents a particular set of challenges for new mothers, and mothers with preschool aged children (who demand a lot of time compared to their school-aged counterparts).

In addition to the re-election pressures faced by legislators, Arneil points to the potential difficulties for lactating and breastfeeding mothers in particular, given the challenge of working in a legislative context. Legislatures are formal, loaded with rituals, and also rigid in their schedules. Elected representatives often have little control over their daily schedules, and need to respond to division bells and unpredictable votes on short notice. This is in stark contrast to more common and informal workplaces. Indeed, Arneil finds that some legislatures have archaic rules that prohibit infants from the Chamber by defining those infants as “strangers” because they are not duly elected or appointed representatives. When this rule fails to convince, other arguments are used to prohibit feeding infants from a bottle or a breast; in some cases, because “refreshments” are prohibited for all in the chamber. These challenges are evident in recent experiences in some Canadian legislatures: in Alberta, when two Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) were pregnant, it became clear that neither pregnancy

nor childbirth were listed as “approved” reasons for absences from the legislature, in part because no one had thought about this possibility prior to 2016.¹⁰ While we might want to chuckle at this omission, these are real challenges that prevent parents of young children from engaging in some forms of political work that are their democratic and constitutional right. If the goal is to widen the pool of potential political representatives, institutional changes designed to accommodate caregiving responsibilities are a crucial step.

Rosie Campbell and Sarah Childs¹¹ make a similar set of arguments in the UK context, suggesting that political institutions appear to be at odds with “care” in general; the demands of the political job are such that attempts to combine legislative responsibilities with family caregiving responsibilities are especially challenging for women with political careers. These caregiving roles include childcare, but also increasingly include eldercare, or care for an ill family member, regardless of their age. Women disproportionately cover this care work, and the legislative workplace makes this particularly difficult. They make several interesting proposals, including job-sharing among political representatives (for example, two part-time legislators both serving a given riding or district) that would allow elected representatives to fulfil their dual public and private roles. Particularly notable, their argument suggests that by incorporating an ethic of care into political institutions, women, parents, and men



A Message To My Younger Self

Lisa Thompson
MPP for Huron-Bruce (Ontario)

First of all, I would like to say - follow your dreams because with hard work and staying true to yourself - your dreams will come true!

It is also so important to never forget your roots! Always be proud of growing up on a farm. The reality is, in the future, fewer and fewer people will have a chance to have that amazing experience.

And guess what - those 4 Hs you totally embraced will set you up perfectly for your career path! By pledging your head to clearer thinking, your heart to greater loyalty, your hands to larger service, and your health to better living - you will embark on a journey that will present to you many opportunities. Remember to give thanks to those who help you along the way - and always take time to pay those opportunities forward.

Never stop whistling. Always be humble and kind. Cherish your family, friends and time at home. Always strive to be your best self.

(who have increasing care responsibilities in society as well) will all benefit and thus open up opportunities for increased political participation among larger segments of the population.

Parenthood on the Campaign Trail

The nature of political work does not only affect mothers in a legislature. In addition to navigating the formal institutional challenges presented by legislatures, candidates and elected officials also make important choices in relation to their strategic actions, communications, and interactions with constituents and the media. Arneil¹² raises these issues in relation to breastfeeding. She suggests that women might feel pressure to be breastfeeding advocates, but the pressures facing parents and the choices they must make are much broader than this.

Melanee Thomas and Lisa Lambert¹³ assess the communications of Members of Parliament (MPs) in the 41st Parliament, to determine whether there are differences in the way MPs present their families and/or talk about their parental status with constituents both online and in the mail. By analyzing official political communiqués, Thomas and Lambert find MPs who are men are both more likely to be parents and more likely to promote their family lives to their constituents than women MPs. Furthermore, their interviews with MPs suggest that some women actively avoid mentioning their parental status in their campaigns and communications to constituents out of fear of the safety of their children. As is becoming increasingly clear on social media, the type of scrutiny and personal threat faced by female politicians is different from that faced by their male peers, and many mothers fear for the safety of both themselves and their children.

In the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, MHA and former Finance Minister Cathy Bennett has publicly admitted that she has been on the receiving end of substantial online bullying, harassment, and threats; her case illustrates the type of fear and concern we are talking about here.¹⁴ This is not to say that bullying or harassment of men and fathers does not also take place, but that the type of attention given to female politicians is particularly heightened. None of the men (both MPs and staff) interviewed by Thomas and Lambert mentioned security concerns as a factor in deciding whether or not to present their families, and in particular, their children, to the public. The security implications and related strategic choices faced by mothers in politics is something that, though perhaps ignored in the past, may be a growing concern in the future.

Politicians only have so much control over the information the public is given. This is particularly true given the role of the media in covering political campaigns, and its part in framing and analyzing women and their mothering roles. Past research suggests that news media coverage of female politicians is mixed: sometimes when the media chooses to cover a woman's private life the focus is entirely on her children,¹⁵ but at other times, the focus on a woman's children is replaced by a focus on her marital status and sexuality.¹⁶ Recent research¹⁷ by Melissa Miller, which assesses media coverage of Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin in the 2008 presidential primary and election campaigns in the United States, finds that media stereotyping of women and mothers during campaigns might be decreasing. Moreover, her research suggests that voters perceive motherhood and other "feminine" traits positively. This bolsters the argument that women in politics are strategic, savvy actors - who make sensible choices about how to present themselves to the public. It suggests there

A Message To My Younger Self

Tina Mundy
MLA for Summerside -
St. Eleanors (Prince
Edward Island)



Your start in life has no bearing on where you will end up, as it is not how you start the race but how you finish. Live life like it's a marathon, not a sprint. Remember that taking a step backward after taking a step forward is not a disaster but a CHA CHA. So no matter what life throws at you keep dancing. :)

Have the courage to be imperfect and embrace vulnerability. The original definition of courage was to tell your story with your whole heart. So tell your story – the good the bad and the ugly – you never know who is listening and who you might inspire. And, above all, have the compassion to be kind to yourself first, because you can't have compassion for others if you can't treat yourself kindly.

might be benefits to highlighting or suppressing this private information in different contexts. Research in this area shows that gender and parental status affect how women and mothers campaign for political office. With this in mind, there is good reason to believe that safety concerns, perceptions of heightened “trolling” and unfair campaign coverage might be dissuading women (and mothers) from engaging with and participating in politics.

Parenthood, Political Attitudes, and Participation

The data suggest that parenthood affects political careers and the choices made by politicians, and there is evidence that parenthood affects individual attitudes and political participation within the public. This is an area of research which has received less attention in the scholarly literature to date. The focus has tended

to centre on the differences between women and men, or the gender gap, in attitudes and preferences rather than the differences between parents and nonparents, or mothers and fathers. While the literature is nascent, there is evidence to suggest that parenthood is a formative experience that has an important influence on the attitudes and actions of every day citizens.

Recent research by Goodyear-Grant and Bittner¹⁸ suggests that parents tend to be more conservative on issues related to both culture, and crime and security, but they also find that there are very few consistent differences between mothers and fathers. So, while mothers and fathers do not differ much from one another, they do consistently differ from non-parents. O’Neill and Gidengil¹⁹ examine women’s political participation, and assess differences between parents and non-parents. With the exception of lone parents, their results show that the mere presence of children in the home is not enough to decrease some forms of women’s political participation. Instead, the age of children is important: women with children aged five to 12 are more likely to participate in some activities than are other women. There appears to be something about having school-aged children that actually *increases* women’s likelihood to do both volunteer work and sign petitions. This is an important discovery, and it offers a key counterpoint to the findings discussed above that suggest that children might suppress mothers’ desire to seek elected office.

Of course, political activism does not only take the form of petitions and volunteer work. Research by Micheletti and Stolle²⁰ examines the mobilizing effects of children on their parents in the realm of political consumerism. They find that parents of older children are more aware of environmental sustainability issues in relation to food and toys. This is gendered, as mothers are more concerned about these issues than are fathers. En masse, these studies point to the complex relationship between gender, parenthood, and citizen engagement. Being a parent can influence and mobilize citizens, but these effects are not consistent in all circumstances, nor are they equal for mothers and fathers. More research is required to probe the nuanced effects of parenthood on politics.

Conclusions: A Role for Government? Programming to Support Families

Our goal in this article was to describe the current state of politics for mothers in political careers, and as voting, engaged citizens. We found that politics is certainly structured by gendered patterns of

A Message To My Younger Self

Lisa Harris
MLA for Miramichi Bay-Neguac (New Brunswick)

It’s important to believe in yourself. You need to trust your instincts, but understand where you have room to improve.

You should never be afraid to ask questions. Asking questions is the only way you, and those around you, will learn. Uncertainty is just an opportunity to learn something new, so you should never fear admitting you don’t know everything.

Don’t be afraid to lean into every conversation, in any boardroom, no matter who is in the room!

Do your homework, check the facts and ask the important questions. Use this knowledge to guide your decision-making.

Finally, it’s crucial to work with intention. It’s not enough to merely have a target. You need to commit to a specific goal, plan the road ahead, and always be willing to work hard to achieve that goal.



parenthood. From the outset, we argued that while some gains have been made to bring women and mothers more fully into politics, more work needs to be done. We certainly accept many of the patterns present today will change in the future, particularly as women and mothers become more prevalent in politics. This may cause norms to change, and with them, the gendered strategies we noted above. We hope that the online harassment women politicians are subject to will subside as the public becomes accustomed to women in leadership roles in politics. Furthermore, expectations of parents have changed substantially over the last few decades: fathers are generally much more active in the family, through caregiving and household upkeep, and tend to be more equal partners than they had been in the past.²¹ This suggests that stereotypes and norms surrounding motherhood and fatherhood are evolving; it also suggests that issues facing contemporary mothers are likely also to be faced by contemporary fathers in greater frequency than in the past.

These patterns raise some important questions about the causal relationships between gender, parenting, politics, and family life. Are the changes we see sparked because more women are involved in politics now than in the past, and, presumably, they have changed policies and politics through their presence? Or, are more women involved in politics now than they were in the past because attitudes are shifting, making it more socially acceptable for mothers to engage in politics and seek elected office? We suspect it is a bit of both, but we also think the state and government have an important role to play in facilitating the political participation of all parts of society, including both women, mothers, and other traditionally marginalized groups, including racialized minorities, linguistic minorities, immigrants, and the like.

Studies show that there is a relationship between state support for family-friendly policies and the participation of women (and mothers) in politics. Our comparative research on state policies surrounding women and work suggests that most OECD countries appear to agree that paid work and private care responsibilities (i.e. parenting) must be balanced with one another, and that the state has a large role to play in facilitating that work-life balance. Indeed, a number of policy changes and innovations enacted after full suffrage rights were granted to all women have both reflected and facilitated women's increased presence in the paid workforce. For example, maternity, paternity, and parental leave, flexible working arrangements, state-sponsored and regulated childcare, and early

childhood education programs are all policies that have emerged over the past few decades, albeit to varying degrees around the world; all these policies are designed to help working parents balance their public and private responsibilities.

And yet, while state support for working families appears to be valued around the world, changes to institutions and policies that would facilitate women's and mothers' political work, and especially their political careers have not kept pace. We believe we must have a conversation about the role of parents – and mothers in particular – in politics. Do we want parents to be able to fully participate, as is their right as citizens, in politics? If so, this means that we need to be able to accommodate parents in our legislatures, as elected representatives. The implication is that we must rethink the way we “do” politics in order to ensure that this unique workplace is accessible for individuals across all walks of life, and at all stages of family life.

Notes

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A Message To My Younger Self



Patricia Arab
MLA for Fairview-Clayton Park (Nova Scotia)

Be patient. Stop wishing time away, waiting for life to start, and enjoy every minute of what is happening around you in the moment, for this is life.

Take criticism to your head and not to heart. Hearing your critics will show you the ways to grow and will help you figure out the person you want to become, being hurt by criticism only paralyzes you and stops you from moving forward – and there is still so much ahead.

Finally, look at your gender as your greatest strength, not as something that will hold you back. There will be times that other may make you feel that you are less than, but that is only their fear speaking, be kind and be strong, the most "womanly" parts of your personality will be the keys to your success.