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Unsung Heroines: Why Do Mothers Feel Forgotten?

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Citation Information

Garcia, Ashley '22, "Unsung Heroines: Why Do Mothers Feel Forgotten?" (2021). Hamilton Digital Commons.

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Unsung Heroines: Why Do Mothers Feel Forgotten?

Introduction

To regard the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic as one that just stripped “normalcy” from everyone is to oversimplify the impact of the ongoing crisis. In fact, this pandemic is considered “the most crucial global health calamity of the century and greatest challenge that the humankind has faced since [World War II].”¹ The unprecedented challenges to public health, the social sphere, and even work life has left millions of Americans wondering if things will ever be the same again. The much more invasive and yet most forgotten aspect of this crisis, however, is the way in which family dynamics have been drastically changed. With a current total of 25,615,268 cases of COVID-19 in the United States and a daily COVID-19 case rate increase in New York state (from 1,730 in May 1, 2020 to 6,081 in January 27, 2021; excluding NYC cases),² schools and childcare centers in the United States have closed, forcing many parents to adopt a new form of parenting and schooling. Caregivers, especially mothers, who graciously woke up at 7am to make breakfast for their children, joined their boss’ Zoom meeting at 11am, breastfed the baby as they read over their company’s reports at 3pm, and ran to put the children to bed by 9pm, have become the unsung heroines of this pandemic. It is almost as if all the praise in the world offered to public health officials, hospital staff, teachers, and other essential workers, simultaneously meant that mothers were to be forgotten.

Our Research

When our *Unintentional Homeschoolers: Navigating At-Home Learning and Care During a Global Pandemic* project first began in May 2020, the team set out to identify how education and caregiving had changed for families as a result of COVID-19. Initially, responses mostly came from white financially stable women. Thus, this winter we immersed ourselves in learning from families with more diverse backgrounds. Conducting the second portion of the study nearly eight months later signified that the things families prioritized at the start of the global pandemic might have shifted due a second spike in COVID-19 cases.

With a new focus on the intersection of social class, race, gender, and time, we knew we’d be gaining new insights on the types of parenting styles caregivers were adopting during such a difficult period. To give you some background, the study region of Central New York is one of the hardest hit by COVID-19. By reaching out to school officials, childcare providers, and religious and community organizations, caregivers were asked to take a 10-minute online survey. This allowed us to gauge what these families’ households looked like. For instance, some of the survey questions asked about the number and age of kids, employment status, education level, partner information, and if they’d like to participate in an in-depth interview. From the surveys,

¹Endnotes

Chakraborty & Maity. 2020.

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention COVID Data Track. 2021.

22 mothers agreed to participate in a 30-50 minute interview with myself or one of my research peers. The interviewees were asked questions regarding their daily schedules, social life adjustments, the division of household chores, and their general feelings regarding parenting and employment under COVID-19. Yet, while reading, coding, and analyzing the interview transcripts, what appeared to be one of most impactful pieces of information to me was not something prompted by our interview guide but rather their expressed gratitude for finally being given the opportunity to share their worries and frustrations with us. The overwhelming sense of appreciation mothers shared regardless of their socioeconomic status or race is precisely what inspired this piece. Here, I give you their stories.

But isn't more "family time" good?

Elsa: I say that is one thing where I hear a lot of praise for teachers, teachers, teachers. And not that teachers shouldn't get praised, but I'm like, what about these parents that are helping every day doing this grind? And I don't think there's enough focus on that...

With the closing of schools and childcare centers, the primary worry portrayed by government officials and media outlets has been how school administrators would receive pay or how teachers would educate through online platforms. The one thing the public seemed to dismiss is how the closing of schools would impact caregivers, specifically mothers. Perhaps it is because more "family time" has always been regarded as a good thing as outlined by Jessica McCrory Calarco and her colleagues.³ Yet, after an extensive analysis of our data, it is clear that "family time" can only be so good for so little. For example, as Elsa explains:

Well I mean, I think it's given us more time to spend together as a family... I think there is some frustration to the closeness and just being together constantly, and not getting a break from each other. To be able to kind of have a little bit of space is hard. Sometimes, even for myself, to take a little bit of a break, I want to come up into the bedroom and lock the door, but they know I'm in here. So sometimes they're knocking on the door. And so sometimes I have to go into the pantry and shut the door because I'm like they're not going to know I'm in here.

In the same way that Elsa deemed "family time" a benefit of the pandemic, mothers also emphasized that they found themselves feeling desperate for a break. Much of the added stressors they discussed was a direct result of adopting a more child-centered, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive form of childcare. For mothers who had the opportunity to work from home, this style of mothering was often done in conjunction with their paid work. For instance,

³ Calarco et al. 2020.

caregivers with children in 3rd grade found themselves having to log their children on to the computer and clicking the correct Zoom links during their breaks from work. In fact, some interviewees admitted to solely taking breaks from their job to feed their children or to find them alternative extracurricular activities. For mothers with older children-- 4th and 5th graders-- a lot of caregiving is focused on ensuring that their kids were staying on task during school hours. On the other hand, mothers-- usually from lower-income backgrounds-- were often required to work outside of the home. It is important to note that traditional classrooms provided childcare for at least seven hours a day. With the closing of schools and limited contact with extended family and community members, private childcare providers would at times be the only other possible solution-- one that would lead to a financial strain on lower-income families. Already considered "essential workers" and now grappling with the absence of a childcare facility, mothers working outside of the home encountered a new intense form of stress and anxiety in relation to parenting under COVID-19.

Even the few caregivers we interviewed that identified as stay-at-home moms reminded us that practicing this form of childcare prior to the pandemic was never as difficult as it is now with the additional seven hours spent with their children. Although before the closing of schools most mothers offered their kids guidance as they completed their homework, guidance on classwork is also required now. Natalie told me:

But I do miss having clear boundaries between school and work and between parenting and work. I think that's one of the biggest things that I'm dealing with is I feel like I'm always working or I'm always trying to be a better parent, because it's hard to parent and work at the same time.

The added pressure to provide schoolwork assistance and the loss of childcare support through school coupled with the increase of unpaid domestic work done by mothers is enough to cause disruptions to these mothers' employment.⁴ The larger burden of childcare and homeschooling is now at the expense of paid work time.⁵ To disregard the overwhelming amount of labor these mothers are doing is to make invisible the toll it is taking on their mental and physical health. In undermining their work, these participants begin to belittle their own self-worth and perceive themselves to be alone. For example, Elsa describes:

But I sometimes feel like, with my husband being out of the house, I don't think sometimes he's here to see kind of how it operates during the day. And so I don't know that he really knows [how much I am struggling]. And he does a little bit, but sometimes I have to say, "I'm having a really hard time with this." Because it is a lot of stress and change into the

⁴ Collins et al. 2020.

⁵ Collins et al. 2020.

routine... I feel like I've had no personal time at all since this has all started, and that's hard. And so sometimes I will go to a hair appointment, and I will just take the car and drive a little extra because I just need to have some quiet time.

In a similar way, Danny explains how overwhelmed she feels as a result of having her kids at home with her all day:

You just take every day at a time, and trust me there are days that all day long I'm like, "Don't talk to me. I don't want to deal with you." Literally, I will be honest, last Thursday I took a mental health day.

In addition, respondents who lost their job due to the pandemic and are now unexpectedly serving as stay-at-home moms experience a different sort of challenge. As Brenda tells me:

Not that you don't have a purpose as a mother, obviously you do, you feel like your children are your world when you're a mom, but at the same time you also need more than that. And so I think sometimes it feels a little bit like you're secluded when you're a stay-at-home parent. And I think the pandemic is obviously the thing that brought that on for me, otherwise I would still be out in the workforce right now.

The feeling of solitude and subconscious sentiments of guilt felt by respondents like Danny and Brenda outlines the pressures the rest of the world places on mothers.⁶ Society demands that mothers exhaust themselves caring for their children for over twelve hours a day.⁷ Society forces mothers to overwork themselves as they feed, bathe, and educate their children while completing domestic or professional tasks.⁸ Far more worrisome, society teaches mothers that if they are not

⁶ Calarco et al. 2020.

⁷ Christopher. 2012.

⁸ Bianchi et al. 2000.

References

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Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2021. "COVID Data Tracker." Retrieved January 27, 2021 (https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#trends_dailytrendscases)

exploiting their bodies and putting their mental and physical health at risk for their children then they are not doing enough. Still, it is important to recognize the agency mothers have in resisting such demands. This study is proof of that. I write about this to further emphasize the value of their shared gratitude for being able to participate in a study solely focused on them.

When caregivers, specifically mothers, are expected to teach their children about manners, instill values, and provide them with basic care, it is easy to disregard more “family time” as ideal. But this added stress, and anxiety is taking a real toll on these mothers. For instance, Jen tells me:

And I think what you're doing is a real service to the community too, because sometimes it kind of feels everybody expects the parents to, of course, sacrifice and do whatever they need to, but nobody was really interested in feedback. So this [study], I feel, is really interesting and really helpful.

Similarly, Cindy shares with me:

I should thank you for like... I think it's just a really important part of time and history and stuff and I am glad that someone is kind of documenting it [through this study]. And I always say like... I hope we can like, learn from this time...

The participants' vulnerability in describing the difficulty of the situation, the guilt for desiring time alone, and the never-ending thank yous makes it impossible for me to avoid shining a light on these unsung heroines. For those of you that do not currently have tiny ones running around, I hope that you will find it in your heart to acknowledge and applaud the strength and resilience of these caregivers. As for those of you who related to this piece, I hope you know that you too deserve to be heard. I hope you know this piece is to you, for you.

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