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Making Babies, Making Laws 2

By:

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In April of 1977 I was asked to run for the New Hampshire legislature. I had never licked a political stamp before, but I was well known in my community. I had started the Women's Movement in southern New Hampshire, and I had begun a citywide employment program for persons with disabilities. The House minority leader and the incumbent who was about to run for the open Senate seat convinced me to run. They seduced me to run with promises of power to influence new social policies.

In September, I was elected to my first of three terms as a representative in the New Hampshire legislature. Three weeks later I discovered I was pregnant with my third child. Was fear of success or fear of failure the motivating force behind this occurrence?¹ It was unusual for young women with pre-school children to run for statewide office at the time², and I was fearful of the election results. To win would be exciting but frightening. Would I be called names? Would my family be shunned because I was not taking care of my children? Would my children suffer? All these questions plagued me. On the other hand, to lose would be humiliating and very public. Could I bear the shame? I knew it would hurt to lose. Was my pregnancy a way to protect myself by assuring I would have something to look forward to even if I lost? Did the pregnancy buffet me against disappointment and thus allow me to take the risk? Or did I think that being pregnant would protect my femininity and shield me from the criticism of both neighbors and family?

In her book *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* (1997), Suzanne Pharr refers to the struggle among women to work for women's issues in a sexist world without jeopardizing their perceived femininity. After all, "a 'real woman', defined in sexist terms, is submissive, puts the needs of others before her own, is ... biologically determined and glad of it, not fully capable, dependent, physically weak, and wisely subordinate to the greater power and wisdom of men ... a woman cannot step out of role and still be a 'real woman'" (Pharr, 1997: 37). To battle this dilemma, I innately realized that the femininity of a pregnant woman is difficult to negate and that by doing the most traditional of feminine activities (making a baby) I would be spared the pain of criticism.

My husband had not been very supportive of my running for office and clearly expected me to continue cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the children. After all, he was a

young doctor trying hard both to make a living and to build an exciting new experimental practice. In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan points out the lack of evidence supporting the conception that the children of working mothers suffer from developmental and psychological duress. Nonetheless, full-time mothers were perceived, even by my husband, as able to offer their children better time and affection than could a working mother. On the other side, the stifling effects of keeping intelligent women consigned to the home had by this point been acknowledged³, and a reluctant compromise reflected popular sentiment that it was fine for women to work as long as they were home in time to make dinner.

Which of these issues caused my fear? I will never know, though I suspect the answer is all of the above. I do know that I did not want to be the woman who would confirm the prejudices against women's talents just because their bodies produce babies.

I also know that both the election and the pregnancy touched on the very core of my hopes, my dreams, and my fears. My hopes were for power and influence to fulfill my desire to fight for issues close to my heart. My dreams were of really making a difference in the world, particularly for women. My fears were of rejection and ridicule. I worried, too, that my inadequacies would be discovered⁴. After all, I was taking a non-traditional path. I may never fully understand my motivations, but I do not think I need many hours on Freud's couch to acknowledge that the pregnancy allowed me to be a pioneer. It allowed me to keep one foot in the traditional feminine sphere and another in the arenas that were the traditional purview of men: the world of work, the world of social policy, and the world of power and influence. Finally, my maternal state allowed me to learn that, contrary to popular belief, pregnancy can facilitate work, not impede it.

Work Lessons learned from pregnancy

As the weeks went on I found that all the charm, dedication and energy I had used to bring about my victory had deserted me in my nauseated and exhausted state. I no longer had the energy to work the proverbial "twice as hard" as men. I found it quite difficult to be charming when all my energy was focused on keeping the food I had eaten in my belly. However, pregnancy helped me to discover my hidden talents. In the next four months I grew literally and figure-a-tively (pardon the pun) in confidence. I learned that instead of becoming successful by being a whirlwind of energy, I could achieve and gain credibility by lying on the couch and reading. I read everything handed to me. I gained power as the only legislator on my committee who had read everything. Both the men and the women on the committee turned to me for advice on how to vote. I became a force by using no force. My temporary disability opened a whole range of skills upon which I had never before relied exclusively⁵. I read, I analyzed, and the whole committee looked to me for information. Hence, very little passed the committee without my input.

Discovery: The pregnancy advantage

As both the flowers and I bloomed I found the "pregnancy advantage". Men did not find pregnant, outspoken females threatening. My big belly allowed me the freedom to speak my mind without fear of put-downs. I learned that men think that, if you will pardon my

irreverence, the Madonna cannot be a bitch. Perhaps the biological imperative to protect the species leaves men hesitant to attack a woman furthering the species. At any rate, men felt comfortable around me, and I felt comfortable around them since our interactions were free of the sexual overtones and innuendoes that often riddle male-female communication (Tannen, 1994). The pregnancy made me visible, and this visibility added to my potency. The pregnancy also gave me an investment in the future.

With that I wielded a power of passionate commitment, and other legislatures yielded to my determination. At any rate, when I spoke while pregnant, I was heard. The pregnancy even helped me to pass a bill. My town was about to have a new tollbooth built in its midst. I felt that the expense was unnecessary and that the location would divide the city and lead to traffic congestion. While I was able to mobilize a few of the other local representatives to work against the toll both, the House leadership and businesses in the community were waging a well-funded campaign to ensure that the toll booth would be built with no further traffic studies. I could not convince the architects and builders to talk with me about a compromise. When the public hearings finally came, the discussion went on for hours. One of the architects looked over at my swollen legs and protruding belly and with a sneer said, "Do you want to go first?" I replied, quoting the mantra of the Bauhaus School of Architecture, "In politeness, as in architecture, form should always follow function." Impressed with my knowledge of the group that fathered modern architecture, he realized that there was more to me than just my pregnant belly. We walked outside and subsequently came to an elegant solution to our differences. The tollbooth would be built, but only after more studies to determine a location which would neither congest nor divide the city.

Post-partum revelations: no need to make choices

Four days after the birth of my daughter, the minority leader called to tell me he needed my vote on the budget. With my thick support hose and wrap-around skirt, I entered the legislative chambers, my Rebecca quietly sleeping in my arms. The legislature is on its own time clock, which can be stopped for days at a time, particularly at the end of a legislature session. My body, on the other hand, was on its own body time: it hurt and produced milk on demand. As the debate wore on hour after hour, the baby became hungry. I refused to make a choice between mothering and voting. I did both. In fact, several men came over to lobby me on one budget item or another as I continued to nurse. One even asked how the baby was. When I told him she was fine and eating right now, he blushed and backed away. He had been speaking to me for fully five minutes without noticing that I was nursing!

Women have been mothering and working simultaneously for centuries. Visit any third world country and you will see the shopkeepers nursing and selling! I chose to join my foremothers, integrating work and mothering. Like so many other women, I refused to let custom define and restrict me. My baby was fed while the budget was passed, and with a shawl on my shoulders, no one even noticed the joining of my roles. Thus, I maintained my power and duties as both a mother and a legislator.

The Personal is Political: The Policy Implications of my Experiences

Deborah Tannen suggests that women "make sense of the world as a more private endeavor — observing and integrating her personal experience and drawing connections with the experiences of others..."(Tannen, 1990: 92). My observations of myself as a pregnant woman led me to understand the needs of other women and of the society as a whole more potently than by reading any study. They taught me that pregnancy CAN benefit the work-world. My pregnancy enhanced my work, and my work enhanced my pregnancy. I felt sick, and work took my mind off my nausea. My nausea in turn led me to discover new skills that I then brought to work. Due to the demands on time that accompany motherhood, I increased my concentration at work and was forced to prioritize. These organizational skills along with the new strengths I found in myself were all valuable talents from which any employer would benefit.

Like me, other pregnant women can hone new abilities and may find that co-workers see them in a new light. Colleagues along with pregnant workers may be infected by a new enthusiasm for their jobs as investment in the future grows in and around them. Pregnancy should not be interpreted as a problem in the work place destined to limit a woman's capabilities and to force other workers to pick up the slack. Instead, it can be a positive force for the worker herself and for the work place as a whole.

As we all know, pregnancy leads to motherhood. More and more women are both working and mothering. A recent report by the U.S. Commerce Department's Census Bureau documents that in 1998, an astonishing 59 percent of mothers with infants at home had gone back to work compared with the 31 percent of 1976 (Roylance, 2000: A2). Women with children ARE working, and consequently the need to make working and mothering enhance each other is increasing. Issues arising from juggling parenting and the work place are more than just statistics. My experience has led me to think about the social policies needed to facilitate the merging of the two spheres of a worker's life.

My pregnancy and subsequent years of child rearing taught me that motherhood too, could have a positive effect on professional women. The creative thinking required to cope with the changes that the pregnancy brings can help professionals explore dormant talents and thus enhance positions that require multiple skills. Before we can create a care taking friendly workplace we must acknowledge the underlying denial of the positive influences of pregnancy and parenting in the economic sphere. In her book *Care and Equality* (1999), Mona Harrington argues for new policy conversations that elevate care-giving responsibilities to a prominent place in the assessment of the general welfare of the nation. Viewing some of the economic benefits of pregnancy, both for the worker and the workplace, will add a new dimension to these conversations.

As Harrington points out, pregnancy and childrearing are essential to the welfare of the society and the creation of an educated workforce. To date, many important suggestions have been made that will enhance both parenting and work. Flexible hours, better childcare options, job sharing, and telecommuting are but a few of the suggested options

for reconfiguring work. We need to explore and exploit new technologies as a means of revolutionizing the work place. Also, we must eliminate practices that make active parenting and working mutually exclusive propositions, such as coupling medical insurance with work hours and requiring mandatory overtime. Both these policies force parents to choose between parenting and work, despite the fact that both jobs are necessary to build the society.

In addition, we need to recognize the vital role pregnancy and subsequently parenting play in the workplace. These benefits range from specific parenting skills such as teaching bilingualism, an important skill in the expanding global economy, to facilitating the creation of an educated work force. It is the parent or parental figures who teach children the delayed gratification necessary to learn to read, to write, and to calculate, all skills essential to work place success. In discussing a classroom in Massachusetts where almost half the students have individual education plans, Harrington suggests that this problem is likely due to "the lack of time parents have to read with children and provide cognitive stimulation"(Harrington, 1999: 29). Good parenting imbues future workers with the skills necessary to learn and consequently to make positive contributions to the society and the work place. Parenting is thus a vital component of educating future generations. Study after study shows that the most consistent variable leading to success in school and to successful schools themselves is parental involvement. In the United States, our current political debates focus on such issues as school vouchers and more funding for schools. However, what we need to discuss is how to give parents time to be involved in their children's schooling, since we know parental involvement is a contributing variable to school success⁶. We need to focus our political energies and shift the dialogue to assure parents can both support their children and their children's education.

In the United States there is much talk about family values, yet little action is taken to facilitate the function of families. For example, while breastfeeding has been acknowledged as an important issue in children's health⁷, public policy has not established uniform regulations allowing women to combine breastfeeding with involvement in the workforce. The surgeon general recently announced a new national health priority centered on increasing the number of women who breastfeed. Though this move announces a firm stance of government support, it nonetheless fails to establish legal requirements to enable women to breastfeed in the workplace (Barnard, 2000: A6).

Despite these pronouncements, very few women have the luxury of using nursing rooms or breast pumping rooms at work. And, pumping their breasts in bathroom stalls does not coincide with the simultaneous public health recommendations aimed at encouraging breastfeeding. In her book *The Woman in the Body* (1987), Emily Martin quotes Adams and Winston in maintaining that the United States "'is one of the few governments in industrialized nations that does not provide any cash benefits to working women to compensate for lost earnings . . .' This lack of institutional support in the United States makes it very difficult for women to be whole people - productive and reproductive at the same time" (Martin, 1987: 100). In addition, though the Pregnancy Discrimination

Act of 1978 prohibits discrimination based on pregnancy or the potential for pregnancy in the workplace, this case does not clarify where the line can be drawn in defending differential treatment of men and women in the workplace on the basis of biological differences (Daniels, 1990). These discrepancies between the values we espouse as a nation and the actual policies affecting the implementation of these values must be addressed if families are truly a priority in our society.

My intent in this paper is not to provide a clear and extensive set of answers to questions regarding work and parenting in our society. Rather, my goal is to stimulate a discussion that acknowledges pregnancy and parenting as important to the economic arena and therefore as integral part of our economic future. Broken down to its simplest terms, production and reproduction are the two essential tasks of civilization. To maximize the success of any society, the interaction of these spheres must enhance one another. Reproduction continues the species and parenting provides the basis to educate future workers. I hope that by acknowledging that working and parenting need not be in conflict, and indeed may complement one another, we will reduce the stress placed on primary parents who are usually women. I also hope that we can enable these adults to use their creativity and energy so that both families and the work place will benefit from the full range of their skills⁸.

¹ For a discussion on fear of success, see Matina Homer's (1972) article "Toward an Understanding of Achievement-Related Conflicts in Women".

² Though there were 3 women in the Senate in New Hampshire in 1977, and 108 out of the 400 members of the House of Representatives were also women, most of these women were older. As *Boston Globe* columnist Ellen Barry notes, the New Hampshire Legislature "pays the country's lowest lawmaker salary... The result has been a high quotient of retirees" (Barry, 2000: B1).

³ Coined "the problem that has no name" in Friedan's (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*, Chapter One

⁴ See Meghan Daum's (2000) article "You're Smart, You're Successful, So Why Do You Feel Like a Fake?"

⁵ In my perception of pregnancy, I am indebted to all the persons with disabilities who taught me that we are limited in our potential only by our lack of creativity.

⁶ See Shui Fong Lam's (1997) book *How the Family Influences Children's Academic Achievement*.

⁷ See the 1992 House of Representatives hearing "Breastfeeding in the U.S."

⁸ Special thanks to Elizabeth Pederson for editing and footnote research and to the Brandeis Women's Studies Student Scholar Partnership Program which funded her work.

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