

HARD LABOUR:THE SOCIOLOGY OF PARENTHOOD

Caroline Gatrell, *Hard labour: The Sociology of Parenthood*, Open University Press, New York, 2004, 256 pages

Reviewed by Vianney Sebayiga

Is a family-work balance possible in our day to day lives? This is the question that has troubled all of us from time immemorial. Professor Caroline Gatrell, a renowned researcher on relationships and personal lives in the work-life balance and family, explores this conundrum in her book; *Hard Labour: The Sociology of Parenthood*. The book discusses the changes in family practices and employment by focusing on career women who combine mothering with employment. The author challenges the notion that such women should always choose motherhood to careers if they are to be fulfilled. She attributes this belief to social construction, a theory that shapes our attitudes about social values including our understanding of motherhood and employment. To illustrate the effect of this theory, the author interviews participants (both men and women) based in the UK. Interestingly, she included men in this inquiry because earlier scholars did not include the views of men about the motherhood and employment. As such, her work gives a balanced perspective on how couples view family relationships and employment. Although the book was written in 2005, the author's observations are much alive in the professional career woman of contemporary Kenya.

In Part 1 of the book, the author provides a comprehensive overview of the literature on motherhood, fatherhood, family practices, and women in employment. She observes that motherhood has become institutionalized in that society holds particular expectations about how mothers and fathers should behave. It sets the parameters of judging who is a good mother and who is not. This construction, she argues is rooted in patriarchy to undermine the social identity of women. Society imposes that a good mother is one without further identity but one who stays home all the time taking care of the kids. The author notes the trend that highly qualified women are more likely to continue their careers after childbirth. The gap in the existing literature was the failure to understand the reasons why career women combine motherhood with employment.

In Part II, the author conducts a qualitative study of the lives of 20 mothers and their husbands or partners, each of whom is educated to a degree level or above, and has at least one child under five. All the women reported the problems experienced during and after

childbirth ranging from physical and emotional trauma, the domestic work burden at home, the discrimination at the workplace, and the high expectation of being emotionally and practically supportive to their husbands. The author critiques the assumption that in a heterosexual relationship, mothers should undertake wife-work no matter their other commitments. However, she highlights that although the mothers may have rejected motherhood as an institutionalised role, there was a special bond between mothers and their babies.

This book reveals that even when women have more access to employment today, they are still constrained in realizing themselves. The employment policies in place undermine the effectiveness of pregnant and part-time mothers who are also employed; these are viewed by employers as 'weak' and unable to manage the tasks at the workplace. Worse still, they are forced to choose either motherhood or their careers. The prevalence of the notion that fathers are providers and mothers as carers, she argues, has left mothers overwhelmed with domestic work at home regardless of whether they are pregnant or when they are still recovering from childbirth. They are expected to be in control of their needs as well as be there for their children and husbands. Society has bred guilt in women when they take their own needs and emotions seriously; they are reluctant to seek help because they will be embarrassed for admitting to mental health problems.

Additionally, the author shows how work is central to women; it is not that they hate their children but through work, they re-discover themselves after childbirth. Also, some of the participants stated that it helps them to deal with the emotional traumas that come with childbirth. Owing to the need to retain social identity, professional career women choose to go back to work shortly after childbirth. Social identity is very important to human beings in general; each person wants to belong and be identified as someone in the sense of a professional. Work is part of our existence so when society requires mothers to drop their jobs, it is being blind to the essence of our nature as human beings. Often a time, each one of us wants to be identified as a professional like a doctor, a teacher, a lawyer, name it. One of the participants stated that when she was identified as simply a mother, and not a professional woman; there was little, or no reverence given to them.

Furthermore, the author discusses power imbalances in families and shows how this affects decision making at home. Paid work empowers men to be dominant in relationships and have control over the most important decisions for example, on household earnings and matters to

do with children. The female participants stated that during maternity leave when they were not working, their husbands were very controlling in the way the home affairs were managed. This was not the same position when the women were working. They were independent and had a high bargaining power in decision making since they were also earning an income and took care of some of the home expenses.

Another important point highlighted by the female participants is the tension from their husbands/partners when they felt they were no longer being cared for because of the children. These women felt resentful that they were expected to care for the new baby as well as care for their husbands as they did before the childbirth. On being asked to define the qualities that make a good mother, both the male and female participants emphasized that one did not have to be at home with children full time. This was a sharp contrast from earlier scholarly views that suggested that men resented helping their partners out in the home. Some male participants chose to prioritize helping their wives do domestic chores on the arrival of the first child. Others went as far as choosing to reduce career commitment to spend time with the children. Nonetheless, the author illustrates how societal stereotypes make it difficult for husbands to undertake normal tasks associated with childcare and helping out at home.

The book is very fundamental in understanding the complex nature of the institution. It explores in detail the daily challenges in the family such as finances, childcare, power imbalances, and the challenges women go through in marriages and relationships. Women are forced to continue working after childbirth even where their income may not be needed to run the household so that they can have a say in the decision-making process. This book clearly depicts that even though society has constructed motherhood in a certain way, we still have the power and choice to redefine motherhood. This is through supporting women at both home and the workplace by providing occupational therapy, granting longer maternity leaves, and supporting them all through. Everyone has a role to play because the child is not hers alone, but the family's and society's at large; her identity as a professional woman should not be side-lined because of motherhood.