

WE ARE NOT AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE, WE ARE TAPPED OUT: RADICALLY RETHINKING THE VALUE WE PLACE ON CARE WORK

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Address given by Alannah Batho, Parents Work Collective

Last year, Anthony Albanese said that “The full... participation of women in our economy is our nation’s greatest untapped resource.”

In 2017 there was a news headline that, “Mums are the economy’s greatest untapped resource, and we need to fix that. NEW research reveals stay-at-home mums are our biggest waste of potential...” [2017, Liz Burke, News.com.au]

And in October last year, Danielle Wood, former CEO of the Grattan Institute, said “... if untapped women’s workforce participation was a massive iron ore deposit, we would have governments falling over themselves...to get it out of the ground.”

Now I don’t know about every other woman in this room, but personally I don’t feel like I’m a “waste of potential”. I don’t feel like an “untapped resource” that needs to be mined. I feel pretty tapped out, actually.

Because the thing is, it’s not that women are not already working really hard. It’s that a lot of the work that we are already doing is not recognised as work. I’m talking about the unpaid care work.

In reality women are doing it all. We are doing lots of the paid work. We are also carrying, birthing and breastfeeding the babies. We are looking after the kids. We do the vast majority of the housework. We are carrying 99% of the mental load for our families. It’s been estimated that the unpaid care work that we do is worth \$650 billion per year. That’s almost half of Australia’s GDP.

It’s no wonder that we’re stressed and overwhelmed and our mental health is not great.

So perhaps it’s time for a paradigm shift. It’s not that we need women to be working even more. It’s not that we need to tap into this untapped potential. It’s that we need to recognise and value the work that women – and particularly mothers - are already doing. The care work. And, to be frank, we need to get the men to do a bit more of it too.

INTRODUCTION

I am Alannah Batho and I am from Parents Work Collective. I would like to acknowledge the indigenous owners of this land, particularly all of the mothers of the Boonwurrung people.

I’d also like to make clear that when I use the words “mother” and “women” when I’m talking to you today that those words are intended to include people of all genders and identities who engage in the work of birthing babies and caring for children.

Today I would like to talk to you about radically rethinking the value we place on unpaid care work – the work that is predominantly done by mothers. I want to talk to you about how we can change the narrative to start valuing the unique contributions of women.

OUR CURRENT CARE CULTURE

So let me tell you a story.

A woman fell pregnant and she was so excited. She was also super sick with nausea. She got up every day and went to work anyway. She took off 2 sick days in her whole pregnancy.

She felt really stressed about telling her boss she was pregnant. She finally summoned up the courage to do it but it was a bit awkward and she felt like after that she was treated a bit differently to the rest of the team.

She finished up work at 38 weeks, she had this terrible pelvic girdle pain but she wanted to save as much leave as possible for after the baby arrived.

She gave birth. It wasn't a great experience. She ended up with an episiotomy and stitches which hurt so much and she felt like no one really listened to her during the labour and birth. She went home feeling a bit – it was to articulate – but just a bit sad and kind of anxious about it all.

She got home and she loved the baby like nothing else.

She found breastfeeding pretty difficult but she persevered and literally through blood, sweat and tears – from her and the baby – they ended up making it work.

Her husband went back to work after 2 weeks. She was pretty much on her own at home and couldn't move around very well with the stitches. She was still bleeding quite a lot. The first day was okay but the second day was a disaster and she felt so anxious about leaving the house with her baby.

Her mothers' group was okay but there were a couple of women who were a bit judgey and so she left the sessions feeling a bit weird sometimes. She had a couple of other friends with babies but they were back at work already so didn't have much time to hang out. They were really long days kicking around the house and especially when her husband had to work late.

6 months rolled around and God she loved that baby so much, it still felt like Christmas when we woke up the mornings, but she was SO tired at the same time. She knew she had to go back to work at 9 months and the baby was still feeding lots overnight so she started trying to give the baby bottles and encourage it to settle on its own back to sleep but the baby hated that and refused the bottles. It was so stressful. It added to the pressure on her and her husband and made them fight even more.

The first day dropping the baby off at childcare was so awful. She cried all the way to work and again later in the toilets as she pumped milk – because there was no pumping room of course.

A few months in and the baby still cried every morning at drop off but she was getting used to it and did enjoy the adult conversation at work and being able to go to the toilet by herself and pull up her pants with both hands instead of with a baby on her hip.

She started thinking about the baby's first birthday. She was so busy between her paid work and looking after the baby but she wanted to make it a beautiful celebration for her big one year old.

She had fights with her husband because for gods sake WHY was she the only one who thought about what to cook for dinner, she worked 3 and a half days a week to but still on those days had to think about the dinner and everything else as well. God he was annoying. Honestly just drove her mad.

She blew out the candles on the birthday cake with her baby and she was so happy and so proud of her beautiful darling. She was also exhausted in body and in mind.

She had another child a couple of years later and the juggle got 10 times worse. She felt constantly pulled between her job and her kids. She felt like she was constantly running between child care drop off, her job, dinner, bath, bedtime routine, packing lunches, kids parties, work emails, playdates, school enrolments, homework, trying to get to the gym and have some semblance of self-care, seeing her girlfriends. She missed her kids so much when she was at work but then got irritated with them within 10 minutes of being home. It was all busy and rushed and she felt like, shouldn't I be enjoying this more?

Enjoy every moment, said society. Mhm. She just rolled her eyes.

This is not my story. This is not anyone's story in particular. But it's all of our stories. In a culture that doesn't value the unpaid care work, that doesn't value women's unique contributions, care work is often really hard and life is not super unenjoyable a lot of the time when you've got kids.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

The thing is, it's not you. It's them. The systems. The policies. The legislation. The culture that has been created in Australia over time that means that unpaid care work and motherhood in general is devastatingly undervalued. We don't care about it and we don't support it. In fact, not only do we not support it, we penalise it. No wonder we're all pretty tapped out.

The motherhood penalty

A great example of the penalty attached to motherhood is the superannuation system. Don't stress, I'm not going to get boring and technical on you, we just need to look at the big picture, which is this: the superannuation system is inherently discriminatory towards mothers.

The super system is set up so that you accumulate money in an account that is invested on your behalf over your working career, and that all compounds over decades, so that you have a nest egg when you retire.

That's fine for men whose careers are largely linear and largely uninterrupted. It's much more problematic for women who happen to be the gender that must carry, birth and breastfeed the babies.

Having babies – this reproductive work that is unique to women – is critical for a healthy economy. Obviously, it's also critical to the survival of the human race itself.

But as soon as we take time out of the paid workforce to do this work, women are immediately penalised. We don't have super paid into our accounts. That money is not invested for us and so it doesn't grow over the next few decades. We end up with less super than men at the end of it all. That's not even taking into account if mothers want to care for their children beyond those first few months, which many mothers do.

We're told that it's a big problem that our super balances are less than our partners, because if we end up getting divorced or leave our partners, we will end up poor and homeless when we're 65. And we probably will get divorced because we're so frustrated with our husbands for not helping out more with the care work that we're busy doing while we're not getting our super.

And the response from government to this problem? "Mm yes that is really awful, agreed. You mothers better quickly pop back into the paid workforce so you don't end up too poor and too homeless when you're old!"

Men aren't doing the care work

Men still do less care and household work than women, regardless of how much paid work each person is doing. Even when both the man and a women in a couple work full-time, the women still does more care and domestic work.

Workplace issues

The other big issue is that we are all – men and women alike – participating in a workplace which was designed in the 19th century for men with wives at home.

40 years ago, only 23% of families with two parents had both parents working. Now, it is 70% of families. Most of us can't afford for both parents not to do paid work. And most women want to engage in paid work as well. But our system has not kept pace with these changes in parental employment. It is fundamentally inadequate with respect to how it supports and enables the combination of caring and working.

So take school holidays for example – they are a stressful juggle for every family. What are you supposed to do with the kids when you only get 4 weeks holiday a year and they get 12? What about school hours – how are you supposed to pick your kids up from school at 3:30 when you have to work until 5:30? It's a mess.

SO WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

Well, a lot needs to change. But there are so many ways in which we could better support unpaid care work – outside of just telling women to stop doing that care work and to get back into the paid workforce instead.

Take the super system: the government could actually pay women super into their accounts while they are doing the critical work of birthing and caring for kids, so that we actually don't end up poor and homeless when we're old, regardless of our relationship status.

We could provide more paid parental leave to women; 18 weeks to look after a baby is woefully inadequate. Dads could be given much more paid parental leave so that they are encouraged to take on more care work. Our working patterns and systems could be re-designed so that it's not impossible to combine working and parenting.

I could go on. But what it comes down to is this: we need to radically rethink the value we place on care work.

SO LET ME TELL YOU ANOTHER STORY

A woman fell pregnant and she was so excited.

She was also pretty sick with nausea. She told her boss she was pregnant straightaway, so her boss could make the usual allowances for her during her first trimester. She was allowed to change her hours to suit her – she started work early and finished early because the nausea was much worse in the afternoons; she worked from home half the time and took some half days as sick leave when she felt particularly bad. Her team was super supportive, they knew it was a very short-term phase so they made sure her workload was a bit lighter during those early weeks.

She had free physio all during her pregnancy which she used on clinical Pilates sessions so she was able to manage her pelvic girdle pain really well.

She finished up work at 34 weeks so she could really get into nesting and resting for that last part of her pregnancy. She did lots of pregnancy massage and acupuncture so she felt really calm and relaxed.

She gave birth. It was a pretty tough birth but she had this beautiful midwife that had been assigned to her at the start of her pregnancy, so she really felt empowered and listened to during the labour. She ended up with an episiotomy and stitches which hurt but she felt like a bloody superwoman after that birth.

She got home and she loved the baby like nothing else on earth.

She found breastfeeding a bit difficult but she had a couple of excellent lactation consultants that she was able to call on 24 hours a day for free – and they came and did a few home visits – which helped so much and she really grew to love breastfeeding.

Her husband went back to work after 6 weeks. She was a bit nervous but feel pretty good by then, her bleeding had pretty much stopped and the stitches felt fine so she was ready to venture out of the house with the baby on her own.

Her mothers group was okay but there were a couple of women who were a bit judgey and so she left the sessions feeling a bit weird sometimes. But she was also assigned to another playgroup with a mixed aged group of babies which she found much more relaxing and she found some beautiful friends there. She also had a couple of other friends with babies who were still on their extended parental leave so they had coffees and park plays all the time. She continued to get free physio and also joined this amazing free mums and bubs Pilates class that she was able to walk to with bub. She spent most of her days outside and catching up with other parents.

6 months rolled around and she loved that baby so much, it still felt like Christmas when she woke up the mornings.

She was entitled to 12 months paid parental leave at 80% of her pay, and she was taking it at $\frac{3}{4}$ pay, so she didn't have to go back to paid work for another 12 months or so. So even though the baby was feeding a lot through the night, she knew it was normal and the baby actually went back to sleep really quickly when she fed overnight so she kept going with that until the baby started sleeping longer stretches.

She started thinking about the baby's first birthday. She wanted to make it a beautiful celebration for her big one year old. Her girlfriends also organised a beautiful afternoon at the dayspa for her, to celebrate her birthing anniversary and the fact that she had been a mum for a whole year.

She blew out the candles on the birthday cake with her baby and she was so happy and so proud of her beautiful darling.

She went back to paid work part-time when the baby was almost 2. Her husband took his three months government paid parental leave to help smooth the transition for her returning to paid work. It was so good because they were able to spend a bit more time together during that time and he was able to understand how tough it sometimes was being home with the toddler alone! It also created a beautiful bond between the toddler and her husband.

After both their parental leaves finished, she and her husband were both able to work part-time, because they got a decent parental allowance from the government, so they felt able to manage the juggle pretty well.

She had another child a couple of years later. She still did more of the mental load than her husband but they pretty much shared the physical work. She loved spending time with her kids and also loved her paid work days, she was relaxed on those days and she knew her husband would have dinner on the table when she got home and most things under control.

Enjoy every moment, said society. Well, look, I enjoy most of them, she thought.

Now, this is not everyone's ideal scenario by any stretch. But wouldn't a world in which women's unique contributions were cherished and supported be incredible?

Imagine the benefits to the wellbeing of mothers, babies, fathers, families, society, if we actually invested in and supported this care work and this season of life appropriately.

IT'S WITHIN REACH

What I want to especially highlight is that all of what I've described in this story is totally achievable; it's completely within reach.

There's a great quote that always sticks with me by philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer: "All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident."

I think we're somewhere between stages 1 and 2. The idea that care work could be valued and well-supported, and that the season of life in which we have babies be melded much more seamlessly into paid work is probably somewhere between ridicule and violent opposition at the moment. But together, we can move this truth to stage 3, where it's self-evident that supporting mothers and supporting care work is incredibly beneficial to the wellbeing of mums, babies and families and society at large.

SO WHAT CAN YOU DO?

You can support Parents Work Collective. Follow us on Instagram, buy a t-shirt, join our mailing list.

But most importantly, we want you to change the narrative, starting with the language you use.

All mothers work, and we work really hard. It's time we own that, regardless of what "paid work" we do. Calling it "work" doesn't erase the magic moments: it just reframes the viewpoint.

You can start valuing your own contributions and recognising your own work. Let's start using the terms "paid work" and "care work".

So for example, when you're on mat leave, don't describe yourself as "just at home with the kids" and talk about when you're "going back to work." You are already working. You're working full-time caring for the kids. You're doing full-time unpaid care work.

CONCLUSION

The devaluation of care work is both toxic and damaging to all parents. It's a systemic problem, a cultural problem, and a feminist issue. And it affects all of us.

Obviously we can't live in a culture that doesn't exist yet, but we have to start somewhere. Contributions like breastfeeding are only free if our bodies are worthless. We have to assign value to ourselves and our bodies and the work we do, before we can expect others to value it appropriately. Once we fully realise our own intrinsic value, we can act on it and demand better.

There is growing movement of mothers who are demanding better. So, what I want you to take away today is simple, and it's this: care work is real work and it is valuable work.

Thank you.