

Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children

Hewlett, Sylvia Ann.
New York: Talk Miramax Books, 2002.

Reviewed by Carolyn Cunningham

“Baby Scare,” “Baby Panic,” “Late to the Mommy Track,” “The Baby Bust,” and “The Mother Load” are some of the recent headlines dominating the popular press since the release in early 2002 of Sylvia Ann Hewlett’s *Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children*. Hewlett describes an “epidemic” of women who are shocked to find that after pursuing careers rather than motherhood, they are childless and miserable. Although the debate of “children versus career” has been part of public discourse since women’s mass entrance into the workplace following advances of second wave feminism, we might ask what is different about Hewlett’s findings in postmodern America. Rapid advances in reproductive technology and a United States humbled by an international terrorist attack have caused anxieties about the future, making both men and women reevaluate their priorities. But if feminism has taught us anything, it has taught us to consider implicit operations of power both in the representation of “facts” and in their reception.

Hewlett set out to write a book about women in the “breakthrough” generation, our foremothers who were the first to become doctors, lawyers, and CEOs. The majority of women Hewlett interviewed were childless. Hewlett’s probing revealed that these women regretted not having the opportunity to become mothers. Alarmed by these findings, she set out on a mission to expose the effects of career success on women’s lives. Hewlett’s findings come from a national survey of 1,647 high-achieving (earning \$55,000 or more) and high achieving non-career (completed a professional or advanced degree but not currently working) women and a subsample of high-achieving men. Her results are outlined in a chapter entitled “The Sobering Facts.” Forty-two percent of women in corporate America were childless at age 40 and this number rose to 43 percent for African American women.

Hewlett also found significant differences between the older and younger generations of high-achieving women: only 45 percent of younger women had a child by age 35, while 62 percent of older women had had a child by age 35. Given the advances in reproductive technology, most young women assumed they could have children well into their 40s. Statistics, however, tell a different story. Chapter five, “Infertility: The Empty Promise of High-Tech Reproduction,” shows the discrepancies between media accounts of reproductive technologies and actual success rates. Women over 40 have a three to five percent

chance of achieving a live birth through IVF and a 50 to 80 percent chance of experiencing a miscarriage.

Based on her findings, Hewlett urges young women to take charge of their fertility, to focus on finding an appropriate (male) mate in their twenties, and to choose a career path that allows for children (academia has one of the worst track records for supporting motherhood). Furthermore, Hewlett offers the following suggestions: create a national timebank of three-months paid parental leave; restructure retirement plans so they do not penalize workers for career breaks; offer three years of unpaid, job-protected leave.

When I first heard the media coverage of Hewlett's findings, I interpreted it as more backlash to women's career success. The truth is, however, that it is difficult to combine a career and motherhood. Hewlett's book, then, can be seen as a call to action rather than a slap in the face. The discrimination that mothers face in the workplace affects all women. What is needed, in fact, is a workplace that allows all women to participate equally.

In the end, Hewlett writes that the "truth will set us free." I would argue, however, that both Hewlett and her critics have missed an opportunity to promote real change. While Hewlett is motivated by a desire for social change, she envisions a return to traditional values where women are defined by their ability or inability to have children, and heterosexual marriage and nuclear families are seen as the "best" environments in which to raise children. There are many truths that Hewlett leaves out of her book, including the effects of divorce on women's careers and the benefits of alternative parenting and family structures. In the end, we must look beyond Hewlett's findings to alternative "truths" that could radically alter women's position in the workforce.

With Humor and Hope: Learning from Our Mothers' Depression and Alcoholism

Peets, Christine.
Victoria: Trafford, 2001.

Reviewed by Rivka Greenberg

In *With Humor and Hope: Learning from Our Mothers' Depression and Alcoholism*, Christine Peets addresses two problems that afflict women and often are shrouded in silence: alcohol/substance abuse and depression. Only in the past quarter of a century have clinicians and researchers begun to acknowledge publicly that alcoholism and substance abuse in women are critical health and mental health issues that affect substantial numbers of women. While often intertwined, substance abuse and depression need to be diagnosed separately and each disease requires treatment specific to women's needs.