

Women in Healthcare Blog

7 April 2013 - The cupcake trade off

Lisa Miller's article in last week's Sunday Times magazine emphasised the positive choice being made by women who decide to stop work and be full time housekeepers and child carers. <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/magazine/article3722622.ece> Her feature 'The Rise of the Cupcake Feminist' is a case study of a young American woman, a mother of two, who previously enjoyed a rewarding career as a social worker. It wasn't the nature or load of her work which made her retire to domesticity but the burden of, in parallel, organising and running a household and the children, exhausting in combination with her career work. Her husband had what seems to have been an even more demanding job and certainly had the bigger salary, so it was rational for her to stop paid work and devote herself full time to the caring and domestic chores, including production of the perfect cupcakes and, the article implied, the re-invigoration of a neglected sex life. She made a choice, but hardly seems to exemplify a feminist.

Feminism: the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state.

Do women who make the domestic choice, do so having really had the same rights and opportunities as men? For some women, single parents, there is no choice, paid work and unpaid caring and sole responsibility for domestic chores are combined as a necessary. For those with partners, the 'choice' reflects the persisting pay gap between women and men, and the cheap labour in the workplace and home that comes from women, the transfer responsibility from the partnership to the woman, and a culture where it still suits men, to exploit rather than share caring burdens with wives and partners. And along with this comes disempowerment, both economic and in leadership of society.

The latest Sex and Power report <http://www.countingwomenin.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Sex-and-Power-2013-FINALv2.-pdf.pdf> documents again the slow progress of women in leadership roles in all aspects of British life. Women make up 51% of the population, but only 22.5 % of members of parliament (an increase of only 4% over 12 years). Just 15% of directors of FTSE 100 and 10% of FTSE 250 companies are women. Women remain under-represented in leadership of public organisations. Only 14% of clinical professors of medicine are women.

True choices will be possible only when there is equality of pay, and when society gives to men opportunities that they exploit, to share all of life's responsibilities including the production of perfect cupcakes.

My daughter told me when she was 6 years old that her life's ambition was to be "a stay at home mummy". I felt really guilty, and that I had been a bad role model as full time cardiologist (at that time doing one in four on call for a regional cardiology and cardiothoracic unit). We had a live-out Nanny by then. Now at the age of almost nineteen she is medical student. I would appreciate comments on what sort of advice to give her for work-life choices.

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