
Protection, Autonomy, and Motherhood: Paths to Overcome Child Care Crisis in Special Education and Beyond

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Abstract

Motherhood in the US is the understudied theme in scholarship (Menkedick, 2020; O'Reilly, A., & Green, F. J. 2021).). Historically, American feminist movement focused on voting rights for women and emphasized the needs of white middle-class women. When popular culture represents the sentimental portrayal of motherhood, it hushes over the crisis of American motherhood as no longer sustainable for women. The U.S. is the only country in the developed "first" part of the world that does not offer universal mandatory health insurance nor maternity leave, thus making women at the mercy on the benevolence of either their employers or their husbands. With the recent push against abortion, women are losing ability to be in charge of their bodies and their life choices. COVID-19 had exacerbated trials of women: for women who were employed in academia had to switch to online teaching while taking care of their children during lockdowns. For mothers who have children with special needs these struggles were much more acute due to such children being lost with online instruction. Especially, for children with autism, sitting in front of screens was useless and traumatic. Moreover, the challenges which women-mothers in academia are facing depend also on the geographical location of their institution. Some universities, being worried that the pandemics would result in declining student enrolment, had closed programs and fired up to 25 per cent of its faculty (the story of infamous University of Akron in Ohio.) In addition, local resources to support women with special needs children vary greatly depending on States. The State of Oklahoma was voted the worst state to educate children due to the underdeveloped child-care network and underfunded public education: there is an thirteen-year waiting list for people with disabilities to receive Social Security Benefits in Oklahoma. The level of support which public schools in Oklahoma provide to children with special needs also varies greatly from district to district with some schools with the lowest academic performance records in the entire nation in the downtown of Oklahoma City and with the best schools in the satellite city of OKC, Edmond. In addition, the implementation of one of the most important legal initiatives to provide students with special needs the access to *FAPE*, free appropriate public education in the US, is hindered by schools' unwillingness to provide IEP for students with exceptionalities due to concerns with schools' non-existing resources and staff shortages (many complains and concerns of parents on facebook's pages). My presentation is based on several sets of data. First, it is fifteen interviews, a part of two service-learning projects which students have done in two my undergraduate courses: one of assignments in the course was to interview the female faculty and female staff in Oklahoma City University (Oklahoma City University, Spring 2021-2022). Second, it is based on data analysis of several groups on social media, including Oklahoma Autism

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Parents Support group, DFW Autism Support Group, and others. Third, it is also based on my autoethnographical reflection of raising my son with special needs in Oklahoma. The findings of my paper will emphasize that it is necessary to tie together the experience of mothers with children with and without exceptionalities. Urgent measures must be taken to help mothers. There must be a legal protection for them for being fired the first (and it is the common practice in American corporate culture to fire women with children first; unlike in many other countries, motherhood is only a liability in the US.) Academic which is creating a model for the entire nation needs to embrace a new culture when motherhood is valued and the important part of women's contribution to the health and the future of nation. There must be growing awareness of all kinds of legislative measures, financial support, and a deep commitment to help mothers who have children with special needs; such mothers must remain integrated in the fabric of political&cultural life.