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Haggard sisters, let's end our silence. It's time to bitch

All this stoic 'I can handle it. I can have a job and look after the kids and run the house' business will not change anything

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Perhaps it's just because I've been contributing to [Alpha Mummy](#), *The Times*'s useful new parenting blog, that I've been noticing them more, but it seems that there have been a glut of stories recently about working motherhood, and all the problems that that entails. The most recent, and damning, one was a report last week, which found that mothers of young children are the most discriminated-against sector in employment, with 45 per cent experiencing difficulties in getting work — soaring ahead of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women (30 per cent) and the disabled (29 per cent) in some manner of rubbish work/life Olympics.

Without a doubt, the most pressing subject that feminism now has to address is working motherhood. Feminism, it turns out, has been completely wasted on young women. Chicks of all ages spent the first half of the 20th century piling into marches against sexism, pornography, political disenfranchisement and pro-life legislation, and yet the young, single, modern woman who followed appears to have frittered the whole lot away in exchange for a "Trainee Porn Star" T-shirt and *Heat* magazine.

And none of them wants feminism anyway. "I like men," they always say — making the elementary mistake of confusing "equality" with "a planet where all the men have been banished to some distant moon". This, as far as I'm aware, was never one of the main tenets of feminist theory, but actually an episode of *Star Trek*. How grateful, as I recall, those Amazonian women in glitter-kinis were for the mustardy torso of Kirk. Feminism for mothers, on the other hand — now that wouldn't be wasted. We'd be pathetically grateful if anyone marched for us. Let's face it: we'd be pathetically grateful if anyone did anything for us. If someone puts a baked potato in the microwave for me, I'm apt to burst into tears.

We mothers would *happily* call ourselves feminists. First, because there's nothing like going through a three-day labour with botched epidurals to make you peachy-keen to ensure that there's a great deal of equality going on in every subsequent dealing you have with men. Secondly, because we're used to being called "Mrs Poo-Poo" on a regular basis, and anything else, frankly, seems like a promotion. But as we seem to be approaching some kind of tipping point in modern parenthood — the media focusing on how fundamentally unworkable traditional employment structures are for mothers, and fathers, and, most importantly, children — we need to ask ourselves: "Are we, the mothers, actually making this worse for ourselves?"

And do you know, I think we are. When I had my first daughter I wrote a large piece about how, when I was pregnant, I had the feeling that all the mothers were in a benign conspiracy of silence against me, the foolish virgin. They weren't telling me what childbirth and motherhood were *really* like. They, a bit like Jack Nicholson in *A Few Good Men*, didn't think I could handle the truth. And when I finally had my child I realised that, yes, that was exactly what was happening. No mother thinks a nonmother can handle the truth. And now I am part of that conspiracy of silence, too. When a previously childless friend announces that she's pregnant, I do what all other mothers do: beam, hug them and say such things as "Welcome to the most magical years of your life!"

But here, for your edification, is what a cross-section of my friends who are mothers say they really think: "Hahaha, now you'll see what it's like"; "Oh darling, you've got horrific forceps delivery and postnatal depression written all over you"; "GET HIM TO MARRY YOU"; "What a pity; your career was going so well"; "When your feet get too fat and purple for your shoes, and you don't leave the house for six months anyway, can I have your suede boots?"

The logic of the mothers is not unkind. Why scare the new bug, we think. She'll soon find out anyway, we think. But we have to consider: whom does this self-imposed female conspiracy of silence most benefit? Because at the moment, the only people who are aware of how urgently industry and society needs to change to accommodate modern parenthood are the ones least capable of doing anything about it. Frankly, a quadriplegic on a life-support machine is more likely to get up a petition, go on a march, write a report or kick-start a campaign than a new mother, or the working mother of young children.

No, haggard sisters: all this stoic "I can handle it. I can have a job *and* look after the kids *and* run the house" business will not change anything, except the likelihood of you self-prescribing gin. We need to do what we are best at, and what we have denied for so long: we need to bitch. We need to bitch loud, and long. Maybe we even need to do that waggly-finger thing they do on *Ricki Lake*. We need to tell everyone how awful it is, how tired we are, and how we really will go on strike until the birthrate drops to zero. We need to bitch until everyone sees the sense in shutting us up with flexitime, job-sharing, working from home, tax relief, free Spanx, and a complimentary colour and cut by Nicky Clarke for anyone who has been in labour for more than nine minutes. After all, we've been boring everyone to tears with all the good bits for years.

Is it a plane? No, it's a bionic robot pigeon

Scientists in China claim that they have controlled the flight of pigeons using microelectrodes implanted in their brains. "It's the first such successful experiment on a pigeon in the world," says the chief scientist, Su Xuecheng. The scientists, who reportedly had similar success with mice in 2005, hoped to put the technology to practical use, but would not reveal what purposes the discovery would be used for. Great. As if pigeons — greasy, cancer-footed, onyx-eyed air-rats — weren't repellent enough, there will now be the added disturbance factor of some of them having bionic robot brains controlled by secretive scientists in Beijing. Scientists who also have a back-up army of nano-mice and, let's face it, a load of techno fruit flies from 1999 they just didn't bother telling us about. Brrrrr.

The chill of death

The arch-conservative Cardinal Giacomo Biffi has raised eyebrows by delivering a speech on the forthcoming Antichrist. Biffi has launched into a pretty detailed riff about the Antichrist, concluding that he will be "a pacifist, ecologist and ecumenist". Given that, up until now, I was expecting the Antichrist to be 600ft high, composed of equal parts bull, demon and snake and fairly committed to eating our souls and then digesting them in the bile of hatred and fear, things do appear to be looking up, vis-à-vis the Apocalypse and the Final Reckoning. According to Biffi's way of thinking, should I now live a wholly Godless, blasphemous life — I'm talking short skirts, Guns'n'Roses, sneaky ciggie on a Friday, the works — right up until the last trumpet, all I'm going to get is a lecture about energy-efficient light bulbs and a chilled-out hug. Result.

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