

Being a trainer and a parent

The well-being of trainers is close to Coyote's heart! This article is designed to help us think through the issues around the dual role of being a trainer and a parent. Sometimes the two don't feel or appear compatible, we struggle to make them work together or to understand the questions that our colleagues are working through. This article unpacks some of the questions and helps us to think about the issues at both the personal and the political level.

Preparing yourself for a training abroad

Do you pack just your own luggage or do you also pack for your children who are going to their grandmother? Do you call your friends or do you have to organize a time schedule for child care? Do you empty the fridge or do you have to fill it and even write a "cooking list" for your family?

May 2002, France.

The training that I'm doing is going really well and I enjoy being an international trainer. It's already the fourth day. After our intercultural evening starts I go to the room to make my daily call home. Immediately my husband answers; "I've tried to call you already several times, why is your mobile switched off? Anna is sick! She even might have a fever." Immediately a lot of thoughts are going through my mind. What exactly am I doing here in France when my child needs me? Was it a well thought through decision to work as an international trainer? Who is going to take care of the child tomorrow when my husband has a really important meeting? Is it really worth it? Is it ever going to work out? Am I bad mother? I am not in the mood anymore to participate in the intercultural evening.

by Carina Stabauer,

Annette Mütter, Ragnheiður (Ragga) Stefánsdóttir



Background of this article

Last May the three of us were asked to write an article for Coyote about combining parenthood and training. So we tried to look at this topic from many different perspectives.

Two of us have children and we are quite often confronted with the fact, that either female colleagues or female participants address us especially to know how it works being an international trainer and having children at the same time. It is a fact that there are more and more women participating and working in the training sector - and many of them between the age of 25 or 35 deal with the question if it is possible to combine our job with having children or not. Up to now, it is quite unusual that we are asked by male colleagues or participants how we organise our professional work with our children. It is a fact that there are more fathers in the international field, and therefore obviously more positive male role models exist.

But what about the women?

If we look at our background and environment at home it becomes clear that the expectations of society don't fit together with being an international trainer. How often do we hear "How can you leave your husband and your children at home? Who will

take care of your child when you leave for one week?" or – and this is even worse – "It is incredible that your husband allows you to go on a training abroad!" People feel so sorry for our partners being alone with the children that they invite them for dinner and offer babysitting to them. But if we as mothers stay alone with our children, most people don't even think that this could be a problem, or even ask us, who is taking care of our son or daughter.

If we have a look for example at the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women which advocates in article 5 "a proper understanding of maternity as a social function", demanding fully-shared responsibility for child-rearing by both sexes one could argue that there is no inequality in parenthood from a political point of view. But unfortunately it is still expected by society that mothers have the main child-rearing responsibility and, being a part of that society, we are educated in that way. Feelings of guilt or of being a bad mother easily come up when you are abroad and though we all work on gender issues we recognise that it is quite difficult for us to stand up for our own rights and also not to feel guilty for taking these rights.

Training and family life

What does it mean to be a trainer and have a family?

First of all, becoming a parent is always a big change, and it is not seldom for female trainers to decide to stay at home and/or look for another job. They ask themselves, if they really want to continue working in the international training field, especially since the working conditions just seem not compatible with the life reality of mothers. "A mother has to be with her child – not to travel around the world" is one of the statements which often goes hand in hand with a lot of guiltiness and stress.

At the same time being away from your family also offers new perspectives. At home as mothers we are often only seen in the care-giving role. Once we go on a training, away from our family, we have the opportunity to feel more as individuals again. It seems banal, but knowing that you will be able to sleep through instead of being woken up during the night, to get dinner served instead of cooking yourself, to be able to finish an interesting talk instead of being interrupted a few times, is something wonderful! And since we miss our loved ones a lot while being away, we usually act with more appreciation towards them when we return back home.

Sure, if your son gets sick, or if your daughter is dumped by her boyfriend, children often want to be cheered up by their parents and also by their mum. But not being around as a parent every single day can also cause positive effects for the child. Children of working mothers are often more independent, self-confident and usually have more space to develop their own identity. And if you as an international trainer show your kids that you are self-content with what you are doing, they have a role model they can and will look up to.

But besides children also partners can profit from being the only one at home. "When I am working abroad, the relationship between my son and my husband is much more intense, because I am just not in their way!!!" This depends of course, if your partner is willing to take over responsibility or not.

Working as a trainer always means, that we always act as role models for our participants. And to show them, that not only single and independent people can be successful in their job, a parent as an international trainer might give participants new life perspectives for being able to combine a private life with a career.

Although being a parent and working in the international field offers a whole range of positive effects, a lot of young trainers still fear the negative consequences for their job. "Will anyone still hire me, knowing that I am not so flexible anymore with a child?" "If I get pregnant, does this mean the end of my career as a trainer?"

Solutions and future perspectives

So what can we do? Is there a solution? Can we solve this problem? Could we have trainings where the trainers and even participants could bring their children with them and child care will be offered at the training?

The way training - as a part of non-formal education - is built up, requires that trainers and participants work almost 24 hours a day. Meaning that after the formal day schedule is over it is important for trainers to have time to discuss the issues of the day with participants and it is very important for participants to have the chance of getting to know the others well enough for probable future co-operation and networking.

So the questions are: Would participants have enough energy during this kind of training to take care of their child(ren) after the formal schedule, and have enough energy for this demanding work the day after? Would they get the same out of the training as the rest of the group? And also would a trainer be a "good" trainer, if he or she would also have to take care of a child in the evening?

Beside that we think this would just make sense if we would organize a training for special target groups, like single mothers or parents. Because if we organize child care in "regular trainings" probably more mothers than fathers will bring their kids along and therefore we might be giving out the message to the society that children are women's responsibility. Nothing would change - women just would have to deal with this and figure out how to combine being a trainer and parent. So having babysitting at trainings really does not solve this issue, even though it might be very important for some women.

What is more important is to keep on working on gender equality in general. The situation mentioned above, of a mother doing training with all the hassle around, is probably just the top of the iceberg. It shows us how far we still have to go on gender equality in general. We won't solve this issue of combining being a trainer and a parent unless we work on the whole iceberg.

It might not be so difficult for a mother to go on a training if the society would accept it. If it would be very natural for the father to take full responsibility of the children while the mother is away including cooking, doing the laundry or taking care of a sick child and the child was used to have the father caring for him/her. And it would be different if the teachers of the child would not question it, when the father comes alone to a parent meeting. It would be easier if people don't wonder anymore "Where is the child going to be?" when telling that you are going away for a week. It should be obvious for everybody.

In order to work on gender equality at home, both men and women have to participate in that process. Men would have to be positive about this and be willing to put effort in taking more responsibility at home and see the advantages it has on their life and their relationship with their children. But it is also very important for us women to be willing to give up responsibility and trust our partners to take care of our children. As women we would also have to accept and understand that they might not do it the same way as we would, meaning that the clothes they select for the child may not fit with our ideas about matching patterns and colours, the food they choose to have for dinner on Monday evening might not be the same as we would have chosen, and the way they hang up the laundry may not be the same way as we do.

Conclusions

So one dimension we have to work on is the personal level, the agreement of sharing responsibility with our partners. But it is also very important in order to be able to combine parenthood and training, that the social environment around you is functioning. Meaning that if you have small children there has to be a good child care system around you. Besides that you will very often need support from family or friends. Even though your partner might be willing and enthusiastic about taking care of the children while you're away, it is very unlikely that he is able to get time out off work every time you need to go away.

This leads us to the political dimension, the Gender Mainstreaming approach as "*the systematic integration of the respective situations, priorities and needs of women and men into all policies, with a view to promoting equality between women and men and mobilising all general policies and measures specifically for the purpose of achieving equality by actively and openly taking into account, at the planning stage, their effects on the respective situations of women and men in implementing and monitoring*". Although the European Commission enforces the approach of Gender Mainstreaming in all its organs, programmes and member countries, the result is not yet reached. Of course, we can work in our environment on gender issues but what does that help, if child care systems such as kindergartens are not available for everybody?



The second dimension, which is important in order to enable female trainers to combine their job with their private life, is the political dimension. As the Council of Europe and the European Commission invest a lot of money in training women to become trainers, they need to think about how to keep them within the field so it won't be a waste of money. If women don't see future perspective in combining parenting and training they will give it up and there will be a big loss of human resources.

Training in general needs to be viewed differently. It is necessary for everybody to have a private life, to take care for himself or herself both physically and mentally. But it is especially true for international trainers to find a balance between their job and their personal life.

A new "ideal" trainer has to be born. Not the young, single, smoking, coffee drinker that puts 200% into the training. The new "ideal" trainer can be married, can have children, does some running in the morning and is allowed to go to bed at 24:00 during a training course, but is still considered to be a good trainer.

In order not to lose a lot of good trainers, whether they are men or women, mothers or fathers, the Council of Europe and the Commission are asked to help finding a new framework within training.

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Contact details:

Carina Stabauer: cartaruga@hotmail.com

Amette Mütter: amette.muetter@gmx.de

Ragnheidur (Ragga) Stefansdottir:
ragga@itr.is

