

## Who Does She Think She Is?

### Just How Far We Are From "Equal Parenting"

We recently got our hands on a copy of the forthcoming documentary *Who Does She Think She Is*, by director and producer Pamela Tanner Boll, who is the Co-executive producer of the Academy Award winner *Born Into Brothels*. That film tells the gripping tale of one woman working to help more children in India's "red light" district than she can possibly take on by herself. In *Who Does She Think She Is*, Boll again tackles a story that revolves around women and children, but this time it is the women who need the helping.

*Who Does She Think She Is* takes an in-depth look at what it really means to be an artist and a mother. Big deal, right? Wrong. What we learn when watching the film is that female artists who have family responsibilities have a really hard time. The difficulties come at them from all directions. Penetrating the art world as a woman is tricky enough, doing so as a mother as well is ten times as tough. The stigma against mothers that prevails throughout the working world ("they'll take time off," "they'll be unreliable," "they'll always have other priorities &hellip;") seems exceptionally strong when it comes to art. But the greatest challenge that these women face is much closer to home. It is the expectation that taking care of house and home, and the kids inhabiting that home, is primarily a woman's responsibility.

I can count over a dozen people who, in the past couple of days, have sent me Lisa Belkin's article in *The New York Times* entitled, "When Mom and Dad Share it All." Besides the fact that I have apparently been labeled the equality police in the eyes of my social circle, the verifiable email storm directed my way reminded me that the idea of shared parenting is a rather novel one. As Belkin's article makes painfully clear, the American norm is still more "stone-age" than "modern-age." Women very much shoulder the brunt of the domestic burden— even when they are working as hard as their men-folk. Belkin writes that when both husband and wife have full-time paying jobs, "the wife does 28 hours of housework and the husband, 16. Just shy of 2 to 1, which makes no sense at all." What makes even less sense is that in homes where the woman is the breadwinner and the man does not have a paying job, she still does the majority of the housework. This isn't even counting childcare. Once childcare is brought into the picture, the ratio becomes close to 5 to 1.

No doubt about it: American society continues to view women as the "natural" caretakers. In the case of the female artists that Boll features in *Who Does She Think She Is*, the struggle to maintain a creative career at the same time as living up to the demands of being the family's primary caretaker is often excruciatingly difficult. For instance, one of the women, performance artist Angela Williams, begins the film in a happy marriage and ends it as a divorcee. Her husband simply couldn't handle her growing desire to devote time and energy on her budding career.

With its title and its female focus, *Who Does She Think She Is* risks scaring off a great deal of viewers, simply because many of us have instant negative reactions to things smelling even ever so faintly of "feminist." In fact, my colleague Vetta, formerly a classic knee-jerk-anti-feminist, began the film with a skeptical air. As she watched, however, she became increasingly engaged. The film moves skillfully between in-depth portraits of several women and the discussion of women's role in art throughout history. The result is, simply, captivating. And smart. And, yes, caring.

In an interview with The Lattice Group, Boll said, "I don't think I would have been as persistent, as caring, as careful with each of my subjects, getting them to open up, if I had not had the experience of being a very present and very listening mother." The mothering touch defines the film. And thanks to it, Boll is able to capture the deepest, and most conflicted, desires of several women. The portraits are sensitively drawn, the stories compelling. In the end, we are left both with deep empathy for the women portrayed, as well as a new understanding for the toll the caretaker-expectation takes on women who strive to be good mothers while maintaining their identity as working artists.

*Who Does She Think She Is* underlines how far we really are from "equal parenting" of the kind described in Belkin's *New York Times* article. Personally, I read Belkin's article with interest, but also with worry and &hellip; amusement. Belkin explains that the idea of "equal parenting" is so foreign to most people that there are coaches you can hire to show you how to do it— detailed descriptions of excel spreadsheets dividing daily labor included. It all seems rather absurd. Then again, a spreadsheet or two might not be a bad idea for the over-worked mothers in Boll's film.

The interviews that The Lattice Group has been doing over the past couple of months give me hope that our generation, who will be becoming parents in the next decade, might do things differently. As a young medical student we interviewed recently said, "Sure, the mom carries the thing for nine months, but as soon as it comes out the dad has just as much responsibility." Perhaps, for Gen Y parents, the caretaker-expectation will finally be de-mystified and duties— and joys —divided fairly. As one of the "equal parenting" fathers in *The Times* article comments in regards to his and his wife's seemingly exceptional choice to split caregiving straight down the middle, "Why isn't this just called parenting?" Good Question.

But, if things don't actually change by the time we start procreating, perhaps the question Gen Y mothers should be asking is, "who does he think he is?"

- Astri

Read The Lattice Group's interview with Pamela Tanner Boll [here](#).

Visit the official homepage of the documentary *Who Does She Think She Is* [here](#).

Read the full New York Times article [here](#).