

Advance Forward Moms!

A Paradigm for an Online Community of Working Mothers That Actually Works

This article examines a particular Facebook group that aspires to empower and support working mothers, and, through a narrative and anecdotal approach, analyzes the discourse of the group. The struggles of working mothers in the Western world in general, and in Israel in particular, are ever-present. This article aims to show how in the face of these challenges, this group, through a mother-centred approach of empowerment and community, might be a paradigm for how social media not only reflects the lived experience of working mothers, but can also make changes in the way working mothers see themselves and in the way they face challenges in the personal and professional realms. The foundation of this Israeli Facebook group—called IMAKADIMA: Working and Career-Minded Moms in Israel—is that career and motherhood can and should coexist rather than being an overwhelming juggling act or compromise. At its core is the belief that a community of like-minded working mothers can provide practical and moral support in the areas of work-life balance, and equality in the home and workforce. This article examines various categories of interaction in this group—networking and assistance, work-mother balance, personal development, gender roles, and empowerment—to show that the dominant attitude of mutual encouragement and empowerment outweighs the negative aspects of social media groups.

Social networks, particularly Facebook, have long become a dominant part of modern life, often replacing face-to-face interactions, for better and for worse. Mothers are particularly well represented as social media users (Morris 1273; Kaufmann et al 1; DeScare 32), and their motivations for using Facebook and other social networks are numerous and varied. My own membership in a unique Facebook group—called IMAKADIMA: Working and Career-Minded

Moms in Israel—has convinced me that empowerment and community can be achieved through the use of social media and that this particular group is a model for the empowerment of working mothers.

The foundation of the group, motherhood, frames the issues under discussion in the group, which makes the group truly matricentric, as it centres upon mothers and motherhood. This article examines various categories of interaction in this group—networking and assistance, work-mother balance, personal development, gender roles, and empowerment—to show that the dominant attitude of mutual encouragement and empowerment outweighs potentially negative effects of social media interaction.

The word IMAKADIMA is Hebrew for “mother” (*ima*) and “forward” (*kadima*). “*Kadima*,” however, is also used as an imperative, to encourage one to go ahead. Thus, the translation “Advance forward Moms!” covers the ethos of the group and its purpose. The group members often describe themselves as IMAKADIMAS, which I would translate as “forward-looking moms.” The group’s founder, Cori Widen, describes her impetus for creating the group when, on arriving home from work at 4:30 p.m., a neighbour exclaimed: “Wow, you’re just getting home from work? That’s awful!” (qtd. in Danzinger). The perspective expressed by the neighbour is prevalent, particularly in the highly child-centred Israeli society, and Widen felt that it framed working moms in a “super, tragic overwhelming situation,” which did not represent their lived experiences (qtd. in Danzinger). The Facebook group aimed, therefore, to change the discourse and empower working moms in Israel. The closed group, in existence less than three years, has 7500 members.

The concept of empowered mothering has been developed and articulated by Andrea O’Reilly as beginning with “with the recognition that both mothers and children benefit when the mother lives her life and practices mothering from a position of agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy” (6-7). Empowered mothering, continues O’Reilly, “thus calls into question the dictates of patriarchal motherhood” (7). An important part of empowered mothering involves combining motherhood with paid employment and not seeing this combination as a conflict or struggle. Finally, developing the mother’s selfhood is seen “as beneficial to mothering and not antithetical to it” (7). Cori Widen’s explanation of her reasons for starting the group takes a page from this empowerment manual:

No one is talking about the personal fulfillment from professional success, the ability to be a dynamic human being who is both a mother and something else. No one is talking about the beauty of an equal partnership with a spouse and how that benefits both parents and children, and the positive female role model that I’m providing for my

son, who will someday treat his wife according to those expectations.
(qtd. in Danzinger)

This ethos, together with the idea of women pushing each other upwards and forwards, informs the tenor of the group discourse.

The group is comprised of mothers of all ages who live in Israel but who speak English as their primary language; most members are Jewish and have immigrated from English-speaking countries, some recently and some decades ago.¹ There are single moms, grandmothers, mothers of many children and mothers of one. There are left-wing, right-wing members, and religious and secular ones; there are feminists and traditionalists. There are high-powered executives, academics, entrepreneurs; there are artists, sales representatives, administrators, content writers, and unemployed mothers. Every kind of work is represented in this group: from fulltime to part-time “mommy” jobs to high-stakes careers. There are also a few stay-at-home moms, who are less active on the group and who may be on a temporary hiatus from work outside the home. The subtitles of the group—working and career-minded mothers—reveal that the group is not aimed only at career-driven women; it encompasses anyone working in any job. Israeli economic circumstances, which combine a high cost of living with a relatively low median salary, almost dictate the need for two incomes per family (and certainly that the head of single parent families work); thus, the majority of mothers do work, although not all of them see themselves as career minded. The group is local and tackles issues unique to the Israeli work environment, but often the conflicts and victories will resonate with working mothers anywhere.

The opening message of the group states:

the IK Facebook group is a unique space dedicated to empowering working mothers in Israel by providing practical and moral support in the areas of work-life balance and equality in the home and workforce.... The value of this group has been proven anew with each successful negotiation for higher salaries, more family-friendly employment contract terms, self-advocacy for pre and post-natal rights in the workplace, just to name a few.... The internet ... is vast, and there is room for innumerable general mommy groups, job boards, and many more supremely important causes. THIS space however, is dedicated to a specific mission, a mission we are achieving and are forever grateful for your role in that success.

The administrators facilitate this mission by strictly removing irrelevant posts. Trolling and nastiness are not tolerated, although polite dissent is; the

“mommy wars” are rarely fought out here. And although the stated goal sounds ambitious, examining the group discussions² reveal these goals as being achieved on a daily basis. The group is prolific, and an hour barely passes without a post. It also has an activist arm, which advocates for working mothers’ rights in the Israeli Knesset (parliament) and other organizations. This too fits with O’Reilly’s definition of empowered motherhood as “a political site wherein women can affect social change through the socialization of children and the world at large through political social activism” (7).

Networking, Job Opportunities, and Practical Assistance

The group discussions can be divided into several categories. The first is networking and job opportunities. Jobs are frequently posted on the group, and jobseekers can post brief resumes and request assistance in acquiring work. Another category includes questions that might be categorized as technical—about pension plans, computer programs, resources, transportation, tax brackets, legalities, etc. In this way, the local complexities and paradoxes of the Israeli system emerge: although Israel has famously been dubbed the “start-up nation” (Senor and Singer)—with tremendous opportunities for growth and development—relatively low salaries (according to the OECD index), a rather complicated system of tax credits for parents, an underdeveloped public transportation system, and wage inequity make for often unwieldy and frustrating employment situations. The group is peopled by a knowledgeable and diverse crowd who can provide valuable insights and information based on experience and know-how. Facebook groups allow for the immediate attainment of information personalized to the poster’s experience, and this kind of information seeking is perceived as superior to information attained in a web search (Holtz et.al 418; Cohen and Raymond 943). The members are very generous with their knowledge, and conversations often carry over into private messaging.

Work-Mother Balance

The work-mother balance is where things get interesting in this group. First, the kind of questions and dilemmas that arise are a reflection of the lived challenges of mothers in society and in the working world, challenges that remain and have even intensified decades after the feminist revolution. One member writes, for example, “Has anyone ever started a new job, then a child decides it’s the perfect time to get sick ... and you find yourself needing to take sick days right away? Sigh.” This is a real issue for working mothers, as although advances have been made, mothers still carry the overwhelming burden of childcare in their homes, and this burden takes a serious toll on their wellbe-

ing (Zimmerman 213; Hochschild and Machung). Michele Kremen Bolton discusses a “third shift,” a psychological space in which working mothers experience angst and self-doubt regarding their performance. Here, the poster reveals this kind of inner conflict, clearly calling out for support, and numerous responders encourage her.

Another member posts:

I need advice from those of you who go back to work at home after your kids are asleep.

I find that while I am actively with my kids, the idea of going back to work is not threatening or unappealing (and can be very appealing on tough nights, I admit!).

However, the minute dinner and bedtime are over and I finally have time for me things, I suddenly find myself awash with exhaustion and can't bear the thought of re-entering my office.

I'm sure this is normal. My question is, what do you do to combat it? (Don't tell me to go out for a run, please, I don't think I can bear the guilt I will feel hearing that.)

This poster seems not to be interested in presenting herself as a perfect mother (as if such a construct exists) and openly expresses her occasional yearning for a difficult evening of bed, dinner, and bath routines to be over so that she can return to work. The message is “I’m just doing the best I can to manage” and that is considered not only acceptable in the group but the desired attitude of women trying to do it all—work, home, and then, sometimes, back to work. Resisting the ideologies of the “good mother” and embracing the idea of the “good enough mother” is encouraged here. The poster, in fact, sees her issue as normal and is seeking concrete ideas rather than sympathy. Her closing statement about exercise is tongue-in-cheek, but it also reveals her sense of really not being able to do it all; fulltime working mothers have been found to know that doing it all, all the time, is impossible (Johnston and Swanson 516; Pederson 35). And empowered mothers know it to also be unnecessary (O’Reilly 7). This post garnered fifty-nine responses. One writer writes, “Wow! You ... are super-human!!!! When do you sleep?????” which sincerely expresses her admiration. Another member simply writes, “Empathy,” whereas others encourage the poster to reassess her need to work late at night. The original poster (OP) responds to some of the comments, and it feels as if a real conversation has taken place. All these messages may not help the OP materially

with her situation, but they surely encourage her and boost her self-esteem.

Some posts about this work-mother balance are simply statements either venting frustration or expressing gratitude. A member writes: “On my way to a conference... and feeling very thankful that my neighbor let me drop off my son before 7:00 a.m. ... It seriously takes a village.” An example of venting comes from a member who wrote: “Yesterday I bumped into someone who asked me...: Looking to rev back up your career? ... I ... said I never backed down. But you took a break from it! He said. I didn’t take a break from my career, I had a baby!! Grrr.” The man’s attitude in this post reflects the devaluation of maternity in a working women’s life. Having a baby, says the poster, is an activity, essential and significant, in her life and not some kind of hiatus from work. This patriarchal view of maternity and career as mutually exclusive grates this mother, who looks for support from the group. Angry face emojis abound. Although no solutions to this issue can be found, the very existence of a safe space to vent these frustrations and receive encouragement and endorsement is important to the group members.

Some posters dealing with work-mother balance seem to be simply looking for commiseration: “I am tired. I have been a mom for twenty months and my only day off was when I was in the hospital... six months ago. I am so tired and my house is so dirty. I really want to be able to take 1 day off every month—to fix the house, watch TV and maybe cook something more complicated than pasta. And I can’t. I checked my vacation days.... If I take a day off, it’s to take care of a sick child.” This struggling mother is overworked and overwhelmed, and her words reveal a hopelessness. The 120 responses to her posts are filled with love and care. Many send virtual hugs; a few people message her privately. Heartfelt offers of assistance and all sorts of suggestions are made, especially that she procure some help. A conversation ensues about the baby’s sleeping habits and one member replies: “Even though we are only FB friends, I care about you and am going to be a bossy friend. twenty months is old to still be bed sharing. I can’t imagine it isn’t affecting your and your husband’s sleep and your relationship with each other. Are all three of you honestly happy with this arrangement? If anyone’s answer is no, you need to move your son out immediately.” They may only be FB friends, but the concern is sincere.

The idea of intensive mothering, thought to be the reigning motherhood ideology in the Western world (Christopher 75; Johnston and Swanson 510-11), as exacting a heavy price for working mothers comes through in the responses. It becomes clear that the husband is also exhausted; the manager is unsympathetic, and paid help is too expensive. In this bleak situation, just knowing that people care seems to go a long way. Moreover, the shift in perspective that is encouraged may actually help the OP make a change. The responses

to this post are very Israeli: Israelis, in general, are warm and will freely offer their opinions and assistance (sometimes unsolicited) because of a feeling of togetherness fostered in the society.

The numerous questions on pregnancy, birth, and nursing are often related to this work-mother balance:

I really need to talk to my boss about the details of my upcoming maternity leave... I have a rather unique position and I don't think it will be easy for them to cover for me ... part of me feels badly for "abandoning ship" ... On the other hand, I want to be able to fully focus on my family during the 4.5 months that I plan to be gone, and fear that if I try to accommodate them ... it will be really hard for me to not get dragged in to doing more.... How do you show good-will while protecting your own needs?

The poster is truly conflicted; she wants so much to do the optimum for both her team and her home. This post prompts twenty comments, which unanimously strengthened her instinct to not be involved at work during her maternity leave. One member suggests, "Put together a detailed dummy's guide to being you," referring to the famous "Dummies' Guide" series, which aims to thoroughly guide one through learning any skill. Another member informs her of her legal rights and obligations. The OP, now apprised of her rights and having received anecdotal evidence, decides to confront her boss and conduct the conversation. These questions regarding the revelation of a pregnancy, the ethics of interviewing while pregnant, the technicalities of pumping at work are often filled with the same anxiety expressed in the above post, and the responses, in general, are supportive and helpful, focusing on the mother and her needs.

Personal Development

Another area of posts could be titled personal development, and here members wrestle with issues of professional self-esteem and of professional crossroads and crises. A member writes: "How do you know if something is imposter syndrome or just facing reality? ... am I selling myself short because I don't believe in myself enough, or am I being realistic and taking a great offer that'll lead to something even better?" The imposter phenomenon—the secret sense, often among high achievers, that one does not deserve one's success—is a serious and frequent topic in the group (Clance and Imes). Feelings of inadequacy abound in the personal and professional spheres, which is perhaps further evidence of Bolton's "third shift" theory. The group dynamic, however, is always to uplift, push forward (*kadima!*), and encourage agency and confidence; support, val-

idation, awareness, and empowerment are exactly the antidotes to imposter syndrome (Robinson-Walker 13).

Below we read another very telling post in this realm:

I recently came to a conclusion: I'm perfectly fine with having a "mom" job that means that most of my life is outside the office/my career. Let my husband base his self-value on what he does... and I'll spend more time playing with the kids and doing fun things, and that one day a week I don't work—heck, I'm going to sleep in, exercise, do some hobby (and also clean, cook, do laundry, do the shopping). Maybe I'd rather it this way. Right? Or am I going to wake up and regret it someday, see how far my husband has advanced in his career and how far I have not?

This post garnered sixty-five comments, clearly striking a chord with numerous women in the group. This post reveals how work and professional success seem more closely linked to self-esteem and the lack thereof than personal success in the domestic realm. The very language of the poster is unsure—"maybe, I'd rather it this way," "right?"; it sounds as if she has come to a conclusion, but it is a very precarious one. Do others feel the same, she wants to know. The answer is: it's complicated. Someone advises her to make a choice and "own it and enjoy it!"

Another response in the thread states:

I used to feel very self-conscious and judged ... that I'm not living up to my potential.... I kind of moseyed through college, moseyed through one job and then another, had two kids, and only then started to think about what kind of career I want to build for myself. For a while I felt bad about that, until I ... realized: drive and ambition for professional success are not what make me tick. I like working because I like interacting with others, and I want (and need) to be a contributing member of my family's economy. But I like doing other things too, and becoming a top-notch Something in Some Field is not necessarily high on my priority list.

The above discussion is a manifestation of what Joan Williams calls "choice rhetoric," a discourse of women about whether and how to participate in the work force. Pamela Stone claims that the stories behind this rhetoric of choice actually "reveal a choice gap" (19), created by disparities between (fulltime and part-time and male and female) workers, and that this causes a real ambivalence about the choices made. Many of the replies in this thread reveal the same vacillation between being satisfied with where they are and wanting more at some point. The problem for so many of the women who participated in this

thread is that good jobs do not accommodate motherhood, whereas bad jobs do not confer status and high remuneration (Weber and Williams 772-73). The sense of togetherness in the ambivalence seems to provide some clarity to those participating in the discussion.

Gender Roles

A hot topic in this group deals with gender roles at home and in the workplace. One frustrated mother writes:

I am so happy that my husband is starting school, found an internship and a part-time job. But it kills me that now I'm responsible for pick up, drop off, and most of bedtimes again solo, and to do it all I have to change my work hours so I can pick the kids up from school on time, and take them to therapy and doctor's appointments etc.

My dh [dear husband] is like, well, you can just go back into work earlier to make up the time. Sure. I'll work 8:00 a.m-2:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m-12:00 a.m. ... who the #%%\$ needs to sleep anyways?

Why is it that we women always have to be the flexible parents???

This poster is happy that her husband is being productive, but she is clearly frustrated that the price for his productivity is her ability to maintain a sane work-home balance. Her argument that flexibility is expected of mothers, not fathers, produced many likes (and angry face icons), pieces of advice, and support. More than twenty five years ago Arlie Hochschild discussed the notion of women's second shift in terms of a stalled revolution where women entered the workforce but the institutions of home and marketplace did not catch up (Schulte). This discussion of the frustrations of gender roles and expectations shows that the second shift is still alive and well. People encouraged the OP to communicate her legitimate needs and expectations to her husband, rather than settle into defeat. Interestingly, no husband bashing ensued.

Regarding gender roles in the workplace, the below well-articulated dilemma reveals the shaky place in which mothers sometimes find themselves at work:

I'm kind of mortified: I had to leave a meeting today at 3:30 p.m. The meeting was ... five men, one single woman, the female client who has grown children ... and me. I thought I participated well ... and excused myself in a classy way... The client looked at me and ... said, "go ahead. Go get your kids." I nearly died.... I love being a mom ... I just wish I could

be the mom at home and the employee at work and have it be smoother and less conspicuous.

This real concern about the poster's motherhood undermining her professionalism resonated heavily with the community; many respondents encouraged the OP to accept her complicated balancing act and not allow guilt to weigh her down.

Empowerment

The crowning achievement of IMAKADIMA could be the group's "Bragging Wednesday," when members are encouraged to boast about their achievements, big or small, in the professional or work-life balance area. The idea is to empower women to speak out for themselves, recognize and articulate their strengths, and have those feats recognized by others in the group. Every type of brag can be found on Wednesdays, from completing degrees, to winning enormous grants, to negotiating a raise, and to managing to exercise during the week. Below is a brag about carving out some rare personal space (significantly "stealing" time) among the poster's professional and parenting obligations: "so my life is pretty insane right now... my brag is that I started stealing time ... I started painting.... This is the first painting I finished and OMG, look—it isn't bad! See? So once a week for two hours, I go ... and paint. I really do!"

Here's another brag: "Here's my ImaKadima brag for last night. My two kids watched me pitch our start-up to five hundred people at the mass challenge awards, and then watched as we won the top prize of eighty thousand dollars. All they could talk about this morning was how cool it was to watch mommy talk to everyone and win. So glad they are on this journey with me." This post garnered almost five hundred likes. The poster could have been more than satisfied with the purely professional achievement, but what makes her so proud and happy is her kids' part in her success. This successful interweaving of the two dominant aspects of the OP's life is what the group found so inspiring.

Below is a brag of a different type. It is a type that reminds the group that bragging is not only about presenting one's perfect and polished achievements but also about being real about the ups and downs of their precarious existence:

My brag is something I keep denying myself ... I have been somehow managing on my own for the past ten months, while my husband is not home. Some days, I'm barely holding on ... I've somehow managed to keep my kids relatively shielded from the stress and that is my biggest wish.... My husband is unable to provide any financial assistance whatsoever. I have no idea how I make it through each month. So with all the stress I

am under, although I often feel like collapsing from the weight of worry, I have yet to fall apart completely and I'm still functioning each day. And that is the biggest accomplishment of all.

An overwhelming outpouring of encouragement and support surely bolstered this woman during a tough period. Posts like these provide an antidote to the “Fakebook” phenomenon, in which people only share positive and very partial and carefully chosen images and updates that reinforce their desired online persona, and encourage others to “keep it real.”

Although I could write a separate article focusing purely on the brags, I must point out that not everything is always rosy in this group. A member writes: “Was my rant about being an independent business owner having to pay somebody for a service they will not be providing and how I think it is unfair DELETED? This group is getting weird.” Other members had no problem setting the OP straight: “Your post was antagonizing and aggressive—perhaps that’s why it was deleted?” Follow the rules of discourse on the group was the overriding message. Another member writes: “I think I shall bid adieu to this group which is ... too restrictive for my needs.” The poster objected to her posts being removed for advertising. The group is not hierarchical; the administrators execute the mission of the group on a time-consuming volunteer basis, so many commenters defend the administrators’ efforts to keep the group on topic. People have complained about the strict administration, but every time this happens, others support the enforcement of group rules, which include no advertising (except on “Crowdsourcing Sundays,”), no breaches in privacy, no irrelevant posts, and no posting for others.

Another member writes: “I have deleted the post in which I received several ... negative comments. I am not that sort of person even though my post might have made you think so.” It is not easy to receive negative feedback about online content, and the decision to delete the post is the expression of a desire to undo damage to one’s online persona and image, as the curation and preservation of a positive online image is a value most users pursue (Mehdizadeh 358). This is true, of course, in its positive and negative manifestation in this group, too. It is a given that social media users only see the parts that others display of themselves—parts that are sometimes too polished, sometimes too hyperbolic, sometimes too attention seeking. This is an integral aspect of social media, and it provokes all sorts of insecurities in its users.

When one member posts a part-time job opportunity in a self-funded start-up, which offers a low wage, the discussion becomes charged. Someone asks: “Are they freaking kidding? X an hour??!! We’re worth a lot more than that.” Someone else interjects: “That’s how much a good babysitter makes.” The OP replies: “perhaps this group should rename itself, ‘We are support-

ive Imakadimas if you're paying enough/earning enough.” Others try calm things down. A few women show interest in the position and mention that they are private messaging the OP. The point that another member makes is pertinent: those who need to work and do so at the wage offered are bound to feel inadequate by the comments about the very low salaries. The reminder that everyone starts somewhere and is at a different point in their careers is an important one. But the acrimony felt in this discussion is actually rare in the group. Other negative aspects may be connected to the damaging results of comparing oneself to others perceived as more successful. Sometimes comments about such feelings of comparative inadequacy sneak into the posts. The fear of not garnering sufficient likes and comments may also hold women back from bragging or posting. The likes and emojis can be empowering, but a lack of likes can be disheartening and hurtful.

Conclusion

In a reality where working mothers are challenged on the professional and personal fronts, support is essential to prevent burnout and isolation. The kind of support that uplifts, empowers, and pushes working mothers forward is exemplified in the IMAKADIMA Facebook group. Here, motherhood is at the centre of the discourse—as lived experience, as complicated identity, as institution, and as agency. The ways in which group members balance their motherhood with other parts of their lives, most importantly with employment and career, show that these mothers do not see themselves as victims but rather as trying to fulfill their potential within and outside of the home. Honesty, intelligence, and community are some of the ingredients needed for an authentic source of support and empowerment, and these make for the success of the IMAKADIMA group.

Life in Israel can be intense, certainly for an immigrant population, and nobody is denying the challenges. Social media brings out a tendency to whitewash challenges and present a perfectly curated self-image, a “Fakebook.” Yet the examination of a small chunk of interaction within this group has revealed that despite all its pitfalls and deficiencies, given a focused vision and mission, the right tenor and ethos, a Facebook group can be, and in the case of IMAKADIMA is used, as a site where real empowerment and support can be achieved.

Endnotes

¹This demographic of immigrant women from wealthy countries to a relatively new country, where a different language is spoken and different rules of engagement apply professionally, is interesting and warrants separate research. It

bears mentioning, however, that this immigrant group is a relatively privileged group in Israeli society, both in social and economic status. Immigrating out of choice and ideology, mostly with capital and education, is obviously very different to immigrating because of persecution (North African immigration of the 1950s, and Ethiopian immigration and immigration from the former Soviet Union of the 1990s).

²Most of the discussions and posts mentioned in this article were taken from the first three months of 2017, although certain posts that I located through the search function are from earlier dates in the group's existence. The posts discussed here are highly representative of the group's discourse. It must be said, however, that although I am a scholar (in literature), this article is not a scholarly social sciences study and evidence is anecdotal rather than empirical. Posts have been reproduced "as is" except for typos and editing for length (indicated by ellipses).

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