VOWI
VOICE OF WOMEN IN INNOVATION

WHAT DO NEW MOTHERS AND INNOVATORS HAVE IN COMMON?

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More than we usually admit.

Both are expected to bring something new into the world, without a clear manual, under constant advice, and with a level of responsibility that only becomes real once you are already in it.

1. IN BOTH CASES, YOU START WITH SOMETHING YOU CARE DEEPLY ABOUT… AND VERY LITTLE CERTAINTY.

Most first-time mothers don't really know what to expect.

And if we're honest, most innovators don't either.

You can read.

You can prepare.

You can learn from others.

And still, when the real thing begins, you are learning in real time.

As Rita McGrath and others argue (Refer to 15, 16,17,18,19,20), uncertain ventures cannot be managed as if the future is predictable; they require learning, testing, and adaptation as the path unfolds. Innovation, like motherhood, unfolds in uncertainty.

2. YOU ARE IRRATIONALLY ATTACHED TO WHAT YOU'RE BUILDING.

A baby is not an idea, obviously.
But also... not entirely different.
You bring it into the world.
You nurture it.
You invest time, energy, and emotion. And you are convinced it is special. Innovators often feel exactly the same about their ideas.
That attachment sustains effort, but it can also distort judgment.
Daniel Kahneman, the Nobel Prize–winning psychologist best known for transforming how we understand decision-making and cognitive bias, explored in his well-known book "Thinking, Fast and Slow" how human judgment is often shaped by intuition, emotional attachment, and overconfidence. In innovation, this means we may become so attached to an idea that we unconsciously filter out signals that challenge what we want to believe. Similarly, Raymond Nickerson, known for his influential work on confirmation bias, showed how people naturally seek and interpret information in ways that reinforce existing beliefs. In innovation contexts, this can turn early enthusiasm into selective listening. And Richard Thaler, one of the pioneers of behavioral economics and the author of Nudge, introduced the concept of the "endowment effect": once something feels like ours, we tend to value it more highly simply because we own it. Ideas are often no exception.
So the real challenge is not to care less.It is to care deeply while staying open enough to let reality reshape what we are trying to build.

3.THERE IS SUCH A THING AS “NEWBORN BLINDNESS.”

Every mother recognizes this. To you, your baby is perfect.
Innovators often do the same with ideas.
We become protective.
Less open to critique.
Slightly resistant when reality suggests something different.

Research on disruptive innovation shows how organizations misread or resist disruption because they act with “yesterday’s logic,” over-attach to existing models, and struggle to adapt their response strategies and performance trajectories (Refer to 1, 2).

In sustainability transitions, disruption is not only technological but also about shifts in behavior, practices, and networks, requiring incumbents to let go of established routines—much like parents adjusting to a new reality.

This is one of the reasons innovation initiatives don’t always fail early. They persist, sometimes longer than they should, because proximity clouds judgment.

4.BOTH REQUIRE INCUBATION BEFORE THEY CAN REALLY EXIST IN THE WORLD.

You cannot rush a baby.
You also cannot rush a meaningful idea.
Both require time, nurturing, and sustained effort before they are ready to face reality.
In organizations, this phase is often underestimated.
There is significant investment in ideation, but far less in development and validation.
This is why many companies face what is often referred to as the “pilot graveyard” initiatives that start with momentum but fail to scale, a pattern widely discussed in research.

5.YOU CONSTANTLY RECALIBRATE.

As a new mother, you are essentially running real-time experiments.
Why is he crying?
Hungry? Cold? Hot? Overstimulated? Something else entirely?
You test.
You observe.
You adjust.
Innovation operates in much the same way.
You rarely get certainty.
You get signals.
In fact, dynamic capability research shows that organizational learning capability (sensing, integrating, reconfiguring) is what enables firms to innovate under uncertainty and turn disruption into performance, resilience, and competitive advantage (Refer to 6,7,8,9). These are system-level analogues of a mother's continuous recalibration: noticing signals, adjusting routines, and updating mental models in real time.
And the capability lies in how you interpret them and how quickly you adapt.

6.THERE IS A LOT MORE WORK BEHIND THE MAGIC THAN PEOPLE SEE.

Both motherhood and innovation are often romanticized.
The baby.
The breakthrough.
The visible outcome.

But what actually determines the outcome is less visible:
• repetition
• problem-solving
• persistence
• emotional labor

As the world renowned innovation thought leader, Clayton Christensen emphasized through his work on disruptive innovation, organizations often fail not because they lack ideas or capable people, but because the systems, incentives, and execution structures built around existing success make adaptation difficult. In many cases, it is the invisible work of follow-through, learning, and organizational alignment that ultimately shapes outcomes (Refer to 3,4,5).

7.BOTH ASK YOU TO BUILD SOMETHING MEANINGFUL WHILE BECOMING SOMEONE NEW YOURSELF.

Before becoming a mother, I could understand this analogy intellectually.

Now I am living it.

And what becomes clear is that both innovation and motherhood are not just about building something new, but about becoming someone capable of sustaining that creation.

Both require operating under uncertainty.
Making decisions without full information.
And continuing without guarantees.

8.AT SOME POINT, YOU HAVE TO LET GO OF CONTROL, WITHOUT LETTING GO OF CARE.

This is perhaps the hardest discipline.
To stay committed without becoming rigid.
To care deeply without holding too tightly.
This tension is not just emotional. It is structural.

In innovation systems, over-control slows learning. Attachment delays difficult decisions. And lack of care leads to premature abandonment.
Balancing these forces is what allows both ideas and people to grow.
As Clayton Christensen repeatedly showed through his work on disruptive innovation, many organizations fail not because they lack capability or intelligence, but because they become too attached to what already works. The very systems designed to protect success can unintentionally resist adaptation.

Motherhood, in its own way, carries a similar paradox:
knowing when to protect,
when to guide,
and when to allow growth to happen beyond your control.
But ultimately, you cannot control every outcome.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR SYSTEMS THINKING AND INNOVATION CAPABILITIES?

This comparison is not only personal.
It highlights something we often overlook in how we design innovation systems.
Many of the capabilities required in early-stage innovation continuous recalibration, emotional resilience, decision-making under uncertainty are not just individual traits. They are system capabilities.

At the same time, these are capabilities that women, particularly those balancing professional and caregiving roles, develop and apply continuously.

Yet they are not consistently recognized as drivers of innovation outcomes.
Not in leadership pipelines.
Not in capability frameworks.
Not in how organizations define innovation potential.

This creates a gap.
Organizations invest in tools, processes, and structures while under-leveraging capabilities that already exist within their systems.

THE JOURNEY AS A RESPONSIBILITY

As Silvia Bernadini, an innovation strategist and mother shared with me: ‘’Ideas, like children do not belong to us as much as we would like to believe.’’

We are custodians, not owners. Neither children nor ideas grow simply because they are loved.

They grow, if they grow, because they encounter reality:
feedback
resistance
constraints

And maybe that’s where both motherhood and innovation become even more meaningful.

Not in the idea. Not in the beginning. But in the responsibility of helping something become real.

CONCLUSION

The parallels between new mothers and innovators are not incidental. Both are engaged in the same challenge: ‘’Bringing something valuable into the world under uncertainty. Both require patience, resilience, disciplined experimentation, and care. And both, at some point, demand the same shift:
letting go of control, without letting go of commitment.

APPENDIX - SHORT BIOS

Rita McGrath is one of the world's leading experts on strategy, innovation, and navigating uncertainty. A professor at Columbia Business School, she has been consistently ranked among the top global management thinkers by Thinkers50 and received its prestigious #1 award in strategy. She is the bestselling author of five books on leadership, innovation, and organizational transformation, including The End of Competitive Advantage. Her work focuses on how organizations grow, adapt, reinvent themselves, and build resilience in rapidly changing environments.

More info here: https://www.ritamcgrath.com/publications/
https://hbr.org/1995/07/discovery-driven-planning
https://www.ritamcgrath.com/book/discovery-driven-growth/

Daniel Kahneman was a Nobel Prize–winning psychologist (2022) and one of the most influential thinkers in behavioral economics and decision-making. Best known for his groundbreaking work on cognitive biases, judgment under uncertainty, and human behavior, he transformed how organizations understand risk, choice, and rationality. He was the bestselling author of Thinking, Fast and Slow, and his research has had major influence across innovation, strategy, economics, psychology, and leadership.

More info here:
https://www.amazon.com/Thinking-Fast-Slow-Daniel-Kahneman/dp/0374533555
https://www.amazon.com/Noise-Human-Judgment-Daniel-Kahneman/dp/0316451401

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Clayton Christensen was a Harvard Business School professor and one of the most influential thought leaders in innovation and business transformation. Best known for developing the theory of disruptive innovation, his work explored how successful companies can fail when they overlook emerging technologies, changing customer needs, or new market entrants. He was the bestselling author of The Innovator's Dilemma, a landmark book that reshaped how organizations think about growth, disruption, and long-term competitiveness.

More info here:
https://pll.harvard.edu/instructor/clayton-christensen
https://www.amazon.com/Innovators-Dilemma-Revolutionary-Change-Business/dp/0062060244
https://www.amazon.com/Innovators-Solution-Creating-Sustaining-Successful/dp/1422196577
https://www.amazon.com/Innovators-DNA-Mastering-Skills-Disruptive/dp/1422134814
https://www.christenseninstitute.org/theory/

Silvia Bernardini is an innovation strategist, entrepreneur, and founder of SKY WALKER s.r.l., working across sectors including technology, manufacturing, education, and retail. Certified as an Innovation Manager under UNI 11814, her work focuses on innovation management, systems thinking, human-centered transformation, and building collaborative ecosystems that connect strategy, culture, and execution.

More info here:
https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Silvia-Bernardini

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