

MEET THE MOTHER-SHAMMERS

There's a new breed of superwoman who can give birth and jump back into her skinny jeans without a lump in sight. The scary part? They expect everyone to be able to do the same. *Aquarius* reports

Last October, Maria Kang, a 32-year-old fitness instructor from California, hit the headlines when her health campaign caused uproar amongst women everywhere. Kang posted a picture on her Facebook page displaying her perfectly toned tum in barely there tight workout gear, surrounded by her three young boys, all under four, with the tagline 'What's your excuse?'

The implication that new mums have no excuse not to be as taut and toned as Kang elicited outrage from mothers, who attacked her online as a 'bully' and a 'fat shamer' and called for the post to be taken down.

Defending the controversial post on her website, Kang wrote, "I felt that if others can

"DURING PREGNANCY, PEOPLE KEPT TELLING ME THAT MY BODY WOULD NEVER BE THE SAME. I WANTED TO TELL EVERYBODY THAT THAT IS NOT ENTIRELY TRUE. THREE MINUTES AFTER BIRTH I FELT LIKE MYSELF AGAIN"

overcome incredible challenges to be in shape, why would my story be any different?"

And she's not without her admirers. The photo earned 150,000 shares with many praising her as an inspiration. Fanning the flames, Kang responded to the criticism by adding, "What you interpret is not MY fault. It's yours. The first step in owning your life, your body and your destiny is to own the thoughts that come out of your own head. I didn't create them. You created them."

And when it comes to blaming mothers for their own shortcomings, Kang is not alone. Supermodel Gisele Bündchen attracted similar criticism in December last year when she tweeted

a picture of herself breastfeeding while an army of stylists worked on her hair, make-up and nails. The accompanying hashtag #multitasking attracted scathing comments from working mothers who pointed out that multitasking is a lot easier when you have an entourage.

And it's not the first time she's come under fire from mums. In 2010 the supermodel attacked mothers who don't watch their weight during pregnancy by saying, "I think a lot of people get pregnant and decide they can turn into garbage disposals. I was mindful about what I ate and I gained only 30 pounds [13.6kg]." Adding, "It's called 'labour' not 'holiday' for a reason."

In the same month as Bündchen's breastfeeding picture, Scandinavian blogger Caroline Berg Eriksen, wife of Norwegian Premier League player Lars-Kristian Eriksen, managed to upset new mums when she posted a picture of her washboard stomach and tiny waist on her blog a mere four days after giving birth. Online, mothers branded it 'bragging' stating the WAG must be from 'another species'.

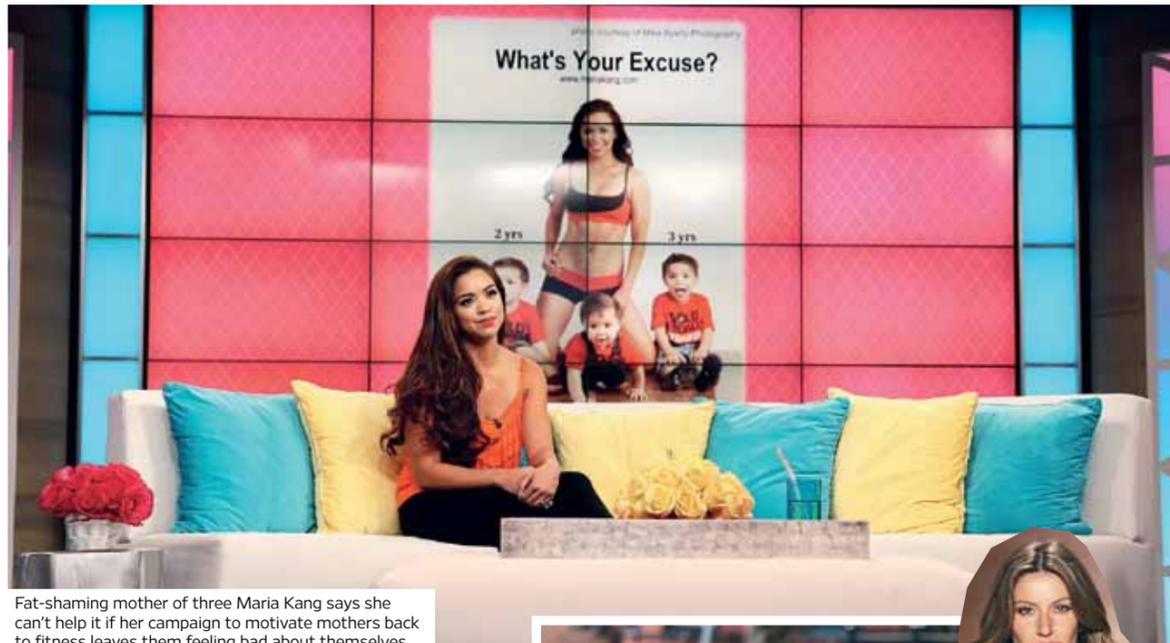
Eriksen defended the post, claiming, like Kang, that she was trying to inspire new mums. "During the pregnancy, people kept telling me that my body would never would be the same. I wanted to tell everybody that that is not entirely true. Right after birth, like three minutes after, I felt like myself again."

SHAME GAMES

Rather than 'inspiring' us towards motivation, posts like these are actually shaming us – and experts say there is nothing that saps our motivation faster. Dr Bijal Chheda-Varma, who heads the eating disorders unit at London's Capio Nightingale Hospital, says, "These images don't increase motivation in a healthy way. They increase pressure, which may lead to short-term motivation and action, which is not sustainable in the long term.

"Shame and motivation are not on the same spectrum. Motivation induces positive feelings and leads to positive behaviour, but shame induces negative feelings and leads to emotional

“WHAT ON EARTH DOES HAVING A SIX-PACK HAVE TO DO WITH BEING A MOTHER? WHEN DID IT BECOME ABOUT HER ABS? IT’S CRAZY”



Fat-shaming mother of three Maria Kang says she can't help it if her campaign to motivate mothers back to fitness leaves them feeling bad about themselves

blocks, which are difficult to manage. Hence using shame to build motivation will have a counterproductive influence.”

In fact, by comparing yourself negatively to these superwomen, you are systematically stripping away your own self-esteem, according to Dr Bijal. “This form of competitiveness is damaging as it chips away at anyone’s self-esteem slowly and steadily,” he warns.

PERFECTIONISTS

The reality is that few women bounce back to their pre-baby weight straight away. Dr Tom Stevens, consultant psychiatrist at London Bridge Hospital, says that trying to emulate this rapid weight loss comes with its own risks.

“You run the gauntlet of worsening your risk of postnatal depression and might put your ability to breastfeed at risk. You are effectively inducing a state of malnutrition and, in a mother who is taking on new responsibilities, this is unwise.”

So where has this sweeping fad of fat-shaming new mums come from? According to Dr Bijal, it is the perfect storm of weight-loss pressure being at an all-time high, blended with our need for an instant solution to everything and an obsession with perfection.

“The public boasting of post-baby weight-loss comes from the same spectrum of competitiveness and societal fixation on body



Supermodel Gisele Bündchen meditated through her home birth and was back modelling swimwear six weeks after she had her son

image and weight. This fixation appears to be fuelling this and other such behaviours.”

Angela Meadows, a doctoral researcher at the University of Birmingham in the UK and founder of www.neverdietagain.co.uk, says these kinds of posts are sending a very dangerous message to women.

“What on earth does having a six-pack have to do with being a mother?” she asks. “Centuries and centuries of women producing offspring – when did it become about the tone of her abs? It’s crazy. When a woman’s body

TEXT BY AOIFE STUART-MADGE PHOTOS BY GETTY

has just done the most amazing thing, has undergone incredible changes over the previous nine months and produced a new human life, it’s just absurd to expect that to not leave a mark.”

Meadows continues to say mothers should be discouraged from exercising after giving birth. “Starting to exercise immediately post-birth, before her core muscles have recovered, can be harmful for her body. And to suggest that a woman’s self-worth is dependent on looking like she’s just walked off a photo shoot for a glossy magazine... When are our achievements enough?”

“There are much, much more important things that she needs to be focusing on at that time than on losing her baby weight,” Meadows adds. “Bonding with her new baby for one thing. She’s likely to be sleep deprived, full of hormones and probably overwhelmed – how on earth can her appearance take precedence?”

“She already has enough stress in her life to deal with – biologically speaking, both dieting and exercise are stressors... They have effects on the levels of stress hormones in her body, and in her milk. She also doesn’t need to be short-changing herself and her baby on nutrients. This is one of the most critical times in the baby’s development. We really need to get our priorities right.”

LOOK AFTER YOU

These images and posts are doing women a disservice, fuelling our negative body image and wrecking havoc with our physical and mental health.

According to new research from Florida State University’s College of Medicine, fat shaming doesn’t make people more likely to lose weight: it can actually make people 2.5 times more likely to become obese.

“There’s a volume of scientific evidence about the impact of shaming on motivating health behaviour,” says Meadows. “Not only does it not work, but it’s likely to backfire completely. People who are made to feel bad about themselves, their bodies, and their weight are less likely to exercise, and more likely to binge eat or engage in other unhealthy behaviour.”

More worrying is that being made to feel fat can actually make you more unhealthy, says a study from Columbia University. Researchers found that people who were unhappy with their weight had more health problems – both physical and mental.

“What that means is that if you have two women who both weigh 200 pounds, statistically, it’s the one who’s miserable about it who is going to suffer the worst effects,” says Meadows. “You could even say that feeling fat may be worse for your health

HAVE YOUR SAY

We asked *Aquarius* mums to share their thoughts on this weighty issue



“The weight falls off naturally”

Charlotte, 29, is mother to four-month-old Evie
“Motherhood is a time to enjoy being with your new bundle of joy rather than stressing about shifting baby weight. While focusing on feeding a growing baby and carrying them around, the weight tends to shift naturally anyway.”

“Dubai mums feel the pressure”

Irene Feeney-Steele, 37, is mother to six-month-old Molly
“There’s an abundance of post-natal fitness activities here, so you feel that you’re expected to lose weight straight away. It encourages you, but it can be stressful. I felt so much pressure that after I gave birth I went on a massive shopping spree for pre-pregnancy-sized clothes in order to motivate me.”

“I don’t compare myself with A-list mums”

Tessa Kiernander, 31, is mother to 18-month-old Dylan
“I didn’t feel much pressure to lose loads of weight after the birth of my son. When I look at celebrity mums, I just think they live a different life. If I had personal trainers, nutritionists and chefs at my disposal I might feel more inclined to keep up with that trend, but as I don’t, it’s just not realistic.”

than actually being fat! It’s pretty clear, people don’t take good care of things they hate.

“Once you start actually liking and respecting your body, you’ll be more likely to treat it right – give it the nourishment it needs, move around and get enough sleep. We do such awful things to our bodies out of self-loathing and fear. If we treated our friends the way we treated ourselves, we’d have no friends left.” **A**