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The (Male) Advantage of a Feminist Mother

Working mothers have long battled the personal doubts engendered by a society which assumes that women who work outside the home are somehow damaging the children thus “abandoned” to other forms of childcare whether the alternative childcare is the other parent, another family member, a neighbor or a day care centre. In addition, women who profess to be feminists are accused of other equally damaging—although less well defined—atrocities toward their children. For example:

Feminists have not answered the argument that day care provides no substitute for the family. They have not answered the argument that indifference to the needs of the young has become one of the distinguishing characteristics of a society that ... exploits existing resources with criminal disregard of the future. (Lasch, 1977: xvi-xvii)

These accusations are even more pronounced if the children happen to be male. As Adrienne Rich described it more than 20 years ago:

I have been asked, sometimes with genuine curiosity, sometimes with veiled hostility, “What do your sons think about all this?” (“All this” being feminism in general, my own commitment to women in particular.) When asked with hostility the implication is that a feminist must be man-hating, castrating; that “all this” must of course be damaging to my children; it is a question meant to provoke guilt. (My only answer, obviously, is, “you’ll have to ask them.”) (Rich. 1986: 207)

We have been asked similar questions and in this paper have used historical, sociological and psychological literature as background for an examination of our own sons' reactions to "all this." We thought to augment our sons' perceptions with those of historically prominent males who had feminist mothers but the term "feminist" created some difficulty for both aspects of the project. Although relatively new, it is deeply mistrusted and misunderstood and has evolved so quickly that the definition has changed from one generation to the next. As Wolf (1993) pointed out, people have difficulty separating out the emotional side issues that have become attached to the feminist movement such as abortion, lesbianism, single parenting, birth control, pornography, spousal abuse, safe streets, common-law relationships, day-care concerns, child abuse, child poverty, racism, classism and a host of other issues. All of these are important to most feminists, but disagreement on individual issues has fragmented the feminist movement and lead to public misunderstandings about feminists' collective intentions. Our sons identified four types of feminism and were willing to be associated with only one of them. Fortunately, that definition coincided with ours, so for the purposes of this paper a feminist is anyone who believes in and is working toward equity between the genders—a definition based on an expectation of equal pay for equal work and equal sharing of household responsibilities.

Seeking the historical precedent

For thousands of years, because of her awesome ability to spew forth a child, mother has been feared and revered. She has been the subject of taboos and witch hunts, mandatory pregnancy and confinement in a separate sphere. She has endured appalling insults and perpetual marginalization. She has also been the subject of glorious painting, chivalry, and idealization. Through it all, she has rarely been consulted. She is an object, not a subject. (Thurur, 1994: 299)

Most modern societies attach deep significance to the mother/child bond through the complex process of nurturance. Whatever the religious orientation, political positioning, class or ethnicity, women are likely to be given the task of interpreting, inculcating and monitoring the socialization of young children on behalf of the wider society. But women have not always had much to do with their growing sons. Until the late eighteenth century in North America, the cultural assessment of women's moral character was essentially negative. Rooted in religious distrust and governance restrictions, women's presumably inborn predilection for instability, emotionalism and irrationality caused many to counsel the removal of children, especially male children, from their mother's purview as early as was reasonably possible.

Before the nineteenth century, large families and the need for mothers to contribute actively to the family economy denied any one child much individual

attention and many young men were apprenticed or bound out as servants before their mid-teens, effectively removing them from their mother's influence. Colonial Americans, like members of most developing societies, understood their world as "an organic social order in which rights and responsibilities were reciprocal and in which terms like 'individuality' and 'self-reliance' had little place.... A person's identity was bound up in the performance of social roles, not in the expression of self" (Rotundo, 1990: 12-13). One "expression of self" thus denied to most mothers and sons prior to the nineteenth century was the assumption that they would have a personal relationship.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century several factors altered common views of nurturance. Family size declined, permitting mothers to accord more attention to each child. Fathers increasingly worked away from the home as the family based economy slowly gave way to an industrial system. The role of mother had changed:

The specifically maternal duties of child care, once defined haphazardly by her round of daily tasks, became a self-conscious enterprise, one that was assigned exclusively to mother, complicated and time-consuming. (Thurur, 1994: 185)

Societal perceptions of women changed from condescension to an equally unbalanced attitude which set mothers up as models of moral rectitude, empathy, industry, self-restraint, and personal purity by which young men were to be both nurtured and uplifted. Fewer sons left the household before their mid to late twenties and mothers were expected to mold young men's characters through a blend of easy companionship and high moral purpose which would last a lifetime.

The advice literature for mothers in this period portrayed the ideal mother/son relationship as emotionally charged and almost sexually reverential: "Oh mother, mother,' he sobbed, 'I wish I had never left you! I'll keep as near to you in heart as I can. I wish I hadn't grown away from you so; but I'll get back again if I can!'" (*Woman's Journal*, October 1890). The author of a pamphlet series directed towards young men in the late nineteenth century rhapsodized:

One of the beautiful sights I have seen is a lady and her son walking, arm in arm, from church, Sabbath after Sabbath. He was like a lover in his tenderness. It made no difference who saw him, he was just as considerate as he could have been if she had been radiant with youth and beauty. (Scott, n.p.)

Mothers were responsible for their sons' physical well-being and their moral development. They were expected to keep the "hedonism of boy culture" out of the house and "extend their moral domain into boys' world" (Rotundo, 1990: 49-50). A really good mother would be able to control her boy's response

even if she was not present. A poem made available for Canadian children engaging in speaking contests sponsored by temperance youth groups between 1916 and 1922 spoke of “A Boy’s Promise” to his mother which earns him the ridicule of his peers. He is undaunted:

“Go where you please, do what you will,”
He calmly told the other.
“But I shall keep my word boys, still”;
“I can’t; I promised mother.”
Ah, who could doubt the future course
Of one who thus had spoken?
Through manhood’s struggle, gain and loss,
Could faith like this be broken?
God’s blessing on that steadfast will,
Unyielding to another,
That bears all jeers and laughter still,
Because he promised mother.
—(Archives of Ontario, Colbec, n.p)

But this process of mother’s uplifting influence occurred—and still occurs today—against a backdrop of expectation that the son will imminently move beyond this secure private zone into an intensely competitive and even dangerous public arena. Here he will be formally educated, socialized through male peers and authority figures, play male-dominated games, and learn to negotiate a profoundly male-centred public domain. This public life implicitly and even overtly denigrates values and behaviours which have come to be associated with women, and in particular, with the son’s mother.

It has been argued that this denigration has often been accomplished through the “rule-bound structure of organized sports” which provided “a context in which they struggled to construct a masculine positional identity” (Messner, 1992: 150). Sports-facilitated masculine identities differ according to class and race (Connell, 1995; Davison, 1998; Frank, 1994; Messner, 1992: 147-163). This denigration of the feminine was—and is—also necessary to ensure that mothers will not prevent their sons from serving in the armed forces. Both sports and the military have been considered male realms, places in which women and women’s ideas did not belong. This separation was a complex juncture for mothers and sons: masculinity and male status is in part expressed in men’s successful separation from the subordination of the sphere of women’s activity (Smith, 1985: 35).

Sons were expected to honor and love their mothers but to subjugate women in general, and mothers were expected to make the transition from authority figure to passive female at the appropriate time in their sons’ lives. Thus, much of the literature produced for mothers over the past two hundred years prepared women for the possibility that their best efforts in civilizing sons

would be subverted by an exceedingly powerful society of which women were not a part.

Early feminists sought admission to that male world from an extremely disadvantaged position. Few women were allowed any knowledge of mainstream society and were routinely denied education and excluded from realms such as commerce and politics. They had to find entry points into “discourses from which women have for centuries been excluded” (Smith, 1985: 4).

There were feminists who were also mothers who considered themselves to be active and visible participants in the public realm but they encountered resistance as they struggled to break down the barriers between the world of men and the world of women. There were those who believed that it was the twentieth century feminists themselves who encouraged the split worlds. As late as 1976, mothers were being admonished for their duplicity as perpetrators of the he-man myth:

Most mothers have retained, and further cultivated, the masculinity myth in their sons. In a sense, they rigidly maintain a schizophrenic world: on one side they clamor for equality and unstandards and, on the other, they teach little boys how to become masculine he-men. (Sebal, 1976: 87, emphasis in the original)

Charting the contours of feminists’ relationships to their sons was not easy. We needed access to the mothers’ perceptions, the sons’ reminiscences and some input from a third party such as a biographer or another member of the family. Such triangulation requirements immediately eliminated all but the famous (which limited the study’s generalizability) and/or the rich, who sometimes have little to do with their own children. We found examples of activist mothers who commented on their sons, but few parallel accounts by these sons or by other observers and vice versa: we were well supplied with reminiscences by sons but we lacked their mother’s perspectives. Activist mothers tended to write about global issues and commented little about their children. Reminiscences by sons of activists tended to focus on earliest memories rather than on their adolescent years when they would be more likely to understand feminist issues.

The references which do exist of writings about feminists by sons are frequently difficult and full of guilt. For example, in an afterward to his mother’s book on parenting sons, Michael Silverstein writes:

[M]y perceptions and memories of certain situations are different from my mother’s. She remembers withdrawing from me and characterizes the attic room of my teenage years as “exile,” while I remember my own active distancing behavior and recall that room as sanctuary. On the other hand, when she draws from her bank of therapeutic memories the general conclusion that many boys “not

only accepted but encouraged this distancing,” I see clearly the shadows of our own relationship.

This confirms what we probably all know: making sense of the mother-son relationship is not easy. Rich refers to the relationship between mother and child as “essential, distorted, misused ... The materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement” (Rich, 1986: 225-226).

The significance of collecting and comparing mothers’, sons’ and other observers’ voices became clear when we eventually found an example fitting our criteria in the form of the relationship between Vita Sackville-West and her son Nigel. There were several biographies, a television series and collections of her letters. Her son had contributed thoughtful portraits of his mother, edited her correspondence, and published others’ accounts.

The marriage of Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson was privileged and unconventional in the extreme, as was their raising of their two sons. Vita was at the same time greatly admired and disparaged in her youth: bisexual, highly-strung, extraordinarily talented and closely connected to the Bloomsbury Set and in particular to Virginia Woolf. Nevertheless she remained married to the same man for her entire adult life and forged a compassionate and (eventually) stable household within which to raise her sons. In her youth and early adulthood, she was regarded as fiercely independent because she insisted on pursuing her writing career rather than acting as help-mate to her diplomat-husband. She was not a feminist in the sense of championing public issues of equity: as a member of the English elite, her social policies can only be regarded as conservative, but she demanded the kinds of life-style freedoms and personal equity within the domestic realm which late twentieth century feminists value. It is understandable that there was no expectation that her sons hold particular views on gender or racial equity since this was not characteristic of English feminism until the 1960’s and was anathema to the class-based ideology within which the Nicolson family was enmeshed.

In surveying what Sackville-West divulged about raising her sons, one is struck by her insistence on honesty in the mother-son relationship, and her clear enjoyment of them as they were on the verge of adolescence. In a letter to Harold, Vita writes of the boys:

26 December 1926 [Ben was twelve; Nigel, ten]

Ben is in bed in Cranmer’s dressing-room—your room!—and I am in bed in Cranmer’s bedroom, and we have the door open between us, so that we can talk. I can hear him saying to himself, “the mild continuous epic of the soil,” like somebody rolling a sweet round and round his tongue. Niggs [Nigel] is the same little clown, a born comic. He has got his bicycle, and is as happy as a king. His is infinitely serviable, unselfish, and affectionate. Also sturdy, practical, resourceful, independent, humourous. I see no flaw in him, as a character;

everybody loves him. I have had to institute scrubbage, as never was there such a little guttersnipe. Otherwise he is perfect; not an intellectual, but we shall have enough to spare of that in Ben. My darling, we are very, very lucky in those two boys. They will, respectively, satisfy all that we could wish for: Ben our highbrowness, Niggs our human needs. Or, at least, so I read them. (Nicolson, 1992: 179)

She was a great proponent of hard work for her sons, and work that stretched them beyond their present abilities. When Ben failed his entrance exams at Oxford, he explained weakly to his mother, "I am bad at being made to do anything which, had I my own way, I would not do." Furious with this self-indulgent attitude, Vita wrote back in exasperation:

My dear Ben! really! What do you imagine life is made of? I curse you for being lazy, wasteful (time, not money) and without guts. I curse you for thinking a veneer of culture acquired principally from the conversation of people older, better educated, and above all more hard-working than yourself, is an adequate substitute for real knowledge, real application, real mental muscles. ... Veneereal disease, that's what's the matter with you. (Glendinning, 1983: 271)

Three years later, she reported to Virginia Woolf that Ben was writing a book on Seurat: "rather ambitious, I think, but I'm all for the young biting off more than they can chew" (DeSalvo and Leaska, 1985: 399). At the same time as she meted out censure when necessary to her sons, she took enormous enjoyment in their talents and affection.

As a writer, Vita Sackville-West worked exceedingly hard, often most of the night. She was an extremely skilled landscape gardener/artist, pouring her energies into the huge gardens at Sissinghurst Castle by day and writing by night. She fully expected her sons to be literate and artistic, to accomplish mastery of these fields through their own labours, and to distinguish themselves as men of "good character." Her sons both became men of letters. Until his death in 1978, Ben was an art historian and editor of the prestigious *Burlington Magazine*. Nigel is author or editor of eight books, publisher of many more and a former British Member of Parliament.

Nigel, apparently on behalf of his brother and himself, has written extensively about his mother. In his *Portrait of a Marriage* (1973) he notes that a gap always existed between mother and sons:

It had been there since we were babies. When we were at school she dutifully tore herself away from her work to visit us on half terms at Summer Field and Eton, and was always sweet to us, but she could not disguise the effort it cost her to find new subjects to talk about when we had exhausted the garden and the dogs. ... Later she always took

an interest in what was happening to us, and during the war wrote to us very regularly, but her letters were more constrained than those she wrote to Harold. Her pen had needed pushing, we felt, instead of keeping pace with her thoughts. She was guiltily conscious that she never managed to establish an intimacy with her sons, and thought herself a failure as a mother, but it was as much our fault as hers. We never made the necessary effort to know her well. (Nicolson, 1973: 226)

Clearly, guilt characterizes both sides of this and many other mother-son relationships. Glendinning (1983) suggests, and Nigel himself concurs, that Vita found it easier to nurture Ben than Nigel, to whom she warmed more slowly (272). Nigel expresses regret about his inability to relate easily to Vita: "I feel remorseful about this. I should have taken the trouble to know Vita better" (Nicolson, 1973: 14). In his *Portrait of a Marriage* (1973), Nigel recounts a painful effort on Vita's part to honour her son, and Nigel's life-long regret at his youthful response:

She paused one evening at the bottom step of her staircase, turned to me shyly and said: "I have written a new poem, and I would like to dedicate it to you." "Oh, don't do that," I replied unthinkingly, "You know that I don't really understand your poetry." She went up the tower without a word, and when she came to dinner I saw that she had been crying. By this incomparably cruel remark I had meant, "Your poetry is the side of you that I have never shared, and cannot claim to share. I don't deserve the dedication. I would be a form of intrusion." But that was not what I said.... I was then 17. (1973: 272)

This story does little to illuminate the affect of feminist ideals on a son, but it does serve to remind us that what a son may assert at 17 is not necessarily what he believes in later life.

What, then, can we conclude about and from the relationship between Vita Sackville-West and her two sons? We know some of what Vita hoped for her sons, how she demanded on occasion that they improve themselves, how one of the sons remembers her, and what became of those sons. We know that this mother, who insisted on time for herself and for her own career development, elicited pride, sympathy and warmth in at least one son, and this the one reputedly more distant from his mother's affections. We have testimony from both mother and son that this unconventional, artistic, proto-feminist mother actively and effectively nurtured her sons, underlining their duties as well as their privilege. We can conclude much about the relationship between mother and sons, and while this relationship seems to have been mutually guilt-ridden, there is no sense at all that the sons regarded their often-absent mother as emasculating, hostile or non-nurturant.

Sons of third wave feminists

Our sons were born between 1971 and 1981. They were raised by feminist mothers in two-parent homes where the mothers may not have been “in the home” to the same extent as other mothers. There was perhaps more sharing of household responsibilities and it is likely that the boys had more personal time with their fathers (and less with their mothers) than was usual for other children. These were the physical implications of having an “absent mother”. In addition, our sons were also the sons of feminists so they heard feminist rhetoric—ideas which may or may not have been in conflict with information they were receiving from other sources. We have tried to separate the issues associated with the “absent mother” from those associated with the “feminist mother.”

When we conducted the research the sons were 24, 22, 18, 17 and 15. At the outset, we were prepared for nasty surprises: that is, we expected to hear about hidden resentments and unknown hurts concerning the ideological battles that had become a part of our professional lives. Neither of us felt that we had “failed” our children, but the natural doubts of parenthood were exacerbated by the fact that we had chosen not to be “at home” mothers. There was a possibility that disapproving relatives and neighbours might have been right. Perhaps we had damaged our children by our lack of “sacrificial willingness to set personal ambition aside” (Thurur, 1994: 287). There was also the feminist issue itself. Feminism is often misunderstood to mean a belief in female superiority and is often denigrated in popular culture. It was possible that our boys suffered because, in spite of our efforts, they did not understand our stand on equity or that they had been ridiculed by peers or mistreated by adults because of our activism.

We used “interlocking conversations” similar to those used by Castle, Reynolds and Abbey (1996). First, the siblings interviewed each other using a set of research questions. Before listening to our sons’ interviews, we recorded our own recollections concerning the same questions. Finally, we had family interviews—mothers and sons. After these had been transcribed and shared, the two mothers discussed them and one mother did a further interview to clarify “absent mother” questions with her sons.

The absent mother

The new division between the public and private spheres ... produced a more dichotomized view of manhood and womanhood, a more elaborate scheme of sex roles. It also made women’s positions more precarious as men worked for wages and women performed the unpaid and increasingly devalued work at home. (Millman, 1991: 136)

When neither parent is available to be a “stay at home” person, there are several integrated issues to be considered: household duties, child care, child

development, and even family finances. The family practice of housekeeping and child care in a dual career household is dependent upon the family ideology. In families where there is a belief that certain activities are “women’s work” there are two possibilities. There may be no change in the wife’s household work load, or the man may assume tasks that he does not normally consider his responsibility in recognition of her wage earner status. In a more egalitarian relationship, the jobs may remain segregated with each partner assuming specific responsibilities or the jobs may be shared in a partnership format (Lein, 1984: 42). Children raised in an egalitarian partnership witness non-traditional work role separation and are more likely to be expected to do all kinds of work regardless of sex stereotyping.

Our sons mentioned almost nothing about household duties or house-keeping routines. One said: “I don’t think there ever has been a time when we came home when there wasn’t a meal on the table or in the process” The boys had the perception that cooperation in doing household tasks was normal:

You trade off things. Someone does the dishes, someone does the laundry, someone does the cleaning blah, blah, blah. We do it together. I think there is maybe a better understanding (now). I don’t think there are many people out there among our friends who would say “I’m not going to clear” or “I won’t cook” or “I’m not going to clean this because that is not my job.” If it comes about, that’s sort of a systemic thing that they don’t talk about. I don’t think people would just say I don’t do cooking because I’m a guy.

When specifically questioned on this issue they dismissed it as unimportant. One boy remembered a time when his friend had been surprised to see his mother driving the car when his father was in the car but other than that he had no comment on the issue.

In both households, childcare duties were also shared. The dual-parenting process produced a sort of “integrated parent” in the minds of the children. They repeatedly used phrases such as “both my parents” or “both you and dad” rather than centering on one role. They had difficulty sorting out which things about their childhood were affected by their mother alone, by their father alone or by this “integrated parent.” The integrated parent allowed them to maintain balance in the absence of an individual full time at home parent.

Contrary to prevailing public perceptions, studies of the security, intelligence, and social adjustment and “masculinity” of sons of working mothers have concluded that they have emotional and intellectual as well as financial advantages. Increased interaction with both parents is beneficial to the child. Children securely attached to both parents showed the greatest interest in other adults, even more than those who were attached only to their mothers (Lamb, Pleck and Levine, 1986: 145). Teachers rated children of employed mothers as better adjusted, more independent and peer oriented (Mischel and Fuhr, 1988: 192). Although some studies have shown that sons of employed mothers had

lower IQs, when the same studies were done with children with increased paternal influence, there was no difference (Mischel and Fuhr, 1988: 193, 198).

Several studies cited by Lamb, Pleck and Levine (1986: 149) pointed out that children develop a sense of personal efficacy when parents make appropriate responses to their signals. Observations in the orphanages of Romania where children were fed, changed and cared for according to a timetable, serve as an example of this. Children who cried were ignored so they learned not to cry. When outsiders came to the orphanages after the fall of the communist regime in 1989, they found three- or four-year-old children who were delighted to accept rides on a merry-go-round but who would not ask for more nor show any indication that they wanted more. They were willing to accept what was given but had no idea that they could intervene to control their environment (*Ideas*, CBC radio, July 13, 1998). As Lamb *et al.* (1986) suggested: “Parents who provided stimulation that is developmentally appropriate and plentiful have more cognitively competent children” (149). However this stimulation can come from either parent or from other sources:

The effects of increased paternal involvement on intellectual performance may reflect ... the benefits of having extensive stimulation from two highly involved and relatively competent parents instead of only one. (Lamb *et al.*, 1986: 150)

Stability of the family unit may be more important to the child than the details of who is available to care for them on a day to day basis (Stafford and Bayer, 1993: 142-146).

The effects of maternal employment on children may be related to how the mother feels about working. If mothers believe they are doing the right thing and they are happy doing it (whether it be working or not working) then their children are well adjusted. The unhappy stay-at-home mother is more damaging to her children than the unhappy working mother in measures of social and cognitive development (Mischel and Fuhr, 1988: 195).

The positive effects of a working mother are most evident during the teen years. Teenaged children of employed mothers have higher self-esteem, more sense of belonging, and better interpersonal relations both at home and at school (Mischel and Fuhr, 1988: 199). Our sons confirmed this research. As one of them said: “I don’t think we suffered in any way.”

Much “mother blaming” literature is based on a perception that an inadequate mother (or perhaps an overbearing one), will do irreparable damage to her son’s masculinity. As Sebald wrote—in seemingly complete sincerity—in 1976: “If a mother does not identify herself with the feminine role, the boy’s masculinity usually suffers and he exhibits more feminine traits” (97). Sebald set out to warn the American public about “Momism,” a dreadful condition in which Mom “tries to manipulate the child by extending acceptance and love on a conditional basis” (Sebald, 1976: 9). This results in a man who is “absolutely

unequipped for making personal decisions ... inclined to marry a woman who will exploit his overdependence ... his wife becomes a substitute Mom—a horrifying prospect indeed” (Sebald, 1976: 11). But fathers are not absolved from blame:

The pivotal point for the boy’s feelings of certainty and adequacy is the role his father plays in his life. If this role is salient, strong, and tangible, personality problems for the boy (including Momistic encroachment) can be warded off. (Sebald, 1976: 102)

Adrienne Rich counters this perception of the mother:

The “son of the mother” (the mother who first loves herself) has a greater chance of realizing that strength and vulnerability, toughness and expressiveness, nurturance and authority, are not opposites, not the sole inheritance of one sex or the other. (Rich, 1976: 209)

In studies of sex role stereotyping, both girls and boys whose mothers work are less bound by stereotypical sex-role perceptions and girls in particular benefit from the increased “flexibility in sex-role perceptions” (Mischel and Fuhr, 1988: 200; Lamb, Pleck and Levine, 1986: 147). This lack of stereotyping provides expanded career options for both males and females and has been associated with more creativity and better personality adjustment and total adjustment scores on standard personality tests (Mischel and Fuhr, 1988: 201).

Although those who study the topics prefer to separate “masculinity” from the issue of homosexuality, questions about masculinity in relation to mothering often focus on the sexual preferences of the sons. There is no evidence that mothers or fathers have anything to do with the child’s eventual choices. The myth that boys choose other men “either in flight from the power of women, or in protest against the traditional male role” is just as prevalent and unsubstantiated as the myth that a boy may become homosexual “in reaction to his fathers khamstvo, his gross abuse of women as sexual objects” or as a replacement for a father who was chiefly absent (Rich, 1986: 211).

Since there is no evidence that working mothers negatively impact their children and some evidence that increased paternal involvement has a positive affect on growing children, it would follow that the “integrated parent” that our children experienced was at least as valuable as having one full time parent and possibly more advantageous. Our sons did not feel that they had been disadvantaged. They spoke only of appreciating our parenting styles:

I guess the argument is that (working mothers’) children suffer ... I think that this is sort of a conservative back lash statement. ... I don’t think I have ever suffered in any way.

Instead of feeling neglected by their mothers, our children commented on how having a working mother enriched their lives both financially (because they contributed to the family income) and intellectually (because they were more interesting). When we asked our sons whether or not women should work outside the home, the boys in both families confirmed that for financial reasons, having one partner stay at home was “not a reasonable way to live.”

Our experience confirms Chodorow’s (1978) contention that traditional views of motherhood are limiting to all concerned. By accepting women in the role of primary care givers deprive sons of the opportunity to develop their capacity for nurturance. By breaking the cycle with a new model of shared parenting “Both male and female children become more whole and ultimately more capable of satisfying relations than their parents were” (Cohen and Katzenstein, 1988: 31).

The feminist mother

What do we fear? That our sons will accuse us of making them into misfits and outsiders? That they will suffer as we have suffered from patriarchal reprisals? Do we fear they will somehow lose their male status and privilege, even as we are seeking to abolish that inequality? Must a woman see her child as “the enemy” in order to teach him that he need not imitate a “macho” style of maleness? (Rich, 1986: 205-206)

The contours of modern feminist mothering theory and practice is documented by third-wave feminists of our own era. (Chodorow, 1978; Cole, 1986; Dinnerstein, 1977; Lorde, 1984; O’Brien, 1981; Reddy, 1994; Rich, 1976; Ruddick, 1980; 1984). A portion of this literature has been devoted to the question of the effective nurturing of male sons (Lorde, 1984; Rich, 1986, Silverstein, 1994). The focus of much of their work is based on the perception that feminists consider men to be “the enemy” and therefore must hate them all, even their own children.

For most feminists it is the patriarchal system which is the enemy, not the individuals within it, especially not those who do not subscribe to patriarchy. We want our sons to become men who understand the issues associated with male privilege and refute the inequity that they see there. This may alienate them from men who view feminist sympathizers with the same disregard as they view women. Thus the aims of feminists raising sons and daughters are similar. They hope to nurture them in a belief that all people are equal and to prevent them from being damaged by patriarchy.

It is absurd to think that women on the path of feminism wish to abandon their sons, emotionally or otherwise ... We wish for our sons—as for our daughters—that they may grow up unmutated by

gender-roles, sensitized to misogyny in all its forms. (Rich, 1986: 207)

In a special 1993 issue of *Ms. Magazine*, feminist mothers wrestled with the question of what constituted feminist nurturant practices of sons. They were concerned with the interrelated issues of teaching children “critical resistance”, humanizing the parental-child relationship, and teaching “aggression deconstruction” and self-protection. They saw themselves as agents of change attempting to produce in their sons a critical view of society, intolerant of injustice. They chose to challenge patriarchal norms through daily discussion with their children, providing them with a vocabulary for understanding systemic injustice. But for boys it is harder than it is for girls. As Morgan noted:

The challenges faced by a feminist rearing a daughter are enormous - but at least you can unambivalently (so I imagine) tell her, Go for it! Don't let anyone stop you. With a son, you must somehow erode the allure of male entitlement and communicate a delicate double message: Fulfill yourself to the utmost as a human being—but try to divest yourself of the male power that routinely accrues to you. Be all you can as a person—but don't forget your automatic male advantages are bought at the cost of their denial to female people. If, as in my case, the son is European American, you try to communicate a comparable message about being white in a racist culture. (Morgan, 1993: 37)

This was a part of our own feminist mothering. Our children spoke about feminism as a gateway to understanding other equity issues. When asked “how did it affect you to have a feminist mother?” one son responded:

I saw stuff more unbiased ... because when you are aware of some of the injustices, and are aware that they occur, you see them, not only as those injustices, but also others that don't have to do with feminism but racism and other stuff like that.

Another son made a similar connection when trying to define feminism:

I think it (feminism) must go beyond just looking at equality ... I would say the same about the black people trying to get equality there. It's just basically fairness.

They seemed to think that being feminist and holding to feminist ideals was “a normal process, especially for educated women.”

The feminist mothers in the 1993 *Ms* article indicated that they had fears for their sons: “Because many of us tend to characterize the world of men as predatory, aggressive, ruthlessly competitive, we fear for our sons more than mothers who see the world of men as more benign” (Gordon, 1993: 48). Rich

wrote sadly of the possibility of isolating male off-spring from the masculine world:

We also have to face the fact that in the recent stage of history our sons may feel profoundly alone in the masculine world, with few if any close relationships with other men (as distinct from male “bonding” in defense of male privilege). (Rich, 1986: 207)

It was our knowledge of the perceived difficulties of being attached to feminist principles which caused us to be startled by the complete lack of resentment and absence of fear in own children. For them, the “aggression deconstruction” and self-protection needs described by the feminists of the ’70s were not important. For example, they considered themselves either feminist or pro-feminist and did not hesitate to say so. One said, “Of course I am a feminist, I think I have always been a feminist.” The sons identified four different types of feminism at various times throughout their conversations. They agreed with the “equity between men and women” type of feminism. One said: If feminism is the fighting for equality, then sure I would want to call myself a feminist. It’s so natural ... I’m a feminist, everybody is feminist. Most intelligent and educated people are feminists.” They also understood the sex role arguments:

Another way (of understanding feminism) is to redefine what is meant by the concept of women and analyze the concept of women. It may not be equality, but trying to change the definition of gender issues and gender roles.

They were not enthused about “intellectual feminism” that is,

the “Simone de Beauvoir” feminism where there is a constant speaking of “Other” and women are labeled the “Other” with a capital “O.” ... I’m not against it but I definitely wouldn’t call myself a feminist in that sense. ... The language in which they write is so confused. ... It is purely intellectual sorts of games. It is really philosophical and interactive.

They were strongly opposed to “Nazi Feminism which says things like ‘all sex with men is rape’ and things like that.”

However, feminism as equity seeking was considered not only normal but beneficial. They intimated that this attitude gave them an advantage over their less enlightened male counterparts. When one said he was “raised to be pro-feminist” he was asked if that had affected his relationships with his peers. He responded, “Yeah. I’m better than them—socially better.” Another commented “I am probably more sensitive to those issues than I would have otherwise been and that’s a good good thing.” Still another said that it gave him

an advantage over other first year university students:

I think we got it (feminism) from you (his mother) but for most people I don't think they get it from high school... At least for males, it's sort of a slap in the face if you go to university... (where) there is strong feminism and all the -isms and all the "Others," all the "marginalized" people really try to take back their lost power. For certain people, this was a shock, (for) those who have never experienced this before for a lot of males and a lot of females as well. ... a lot of shock tactics were being used.

In a later discussion, he commented on the role of feminism in the university setting where "you tend to run into a lot of women who are experimenting themselves with feminism and you are in that process as well." He did not claim that it made relationships with women easier or better, just that:

You tend to try to understand that (their feminism) as well. If you bring it back to having a mother who had feminist ideas, I guess I am more aware of these issues than a lot of other people. I didn't think it made me anything, it just made me more aware of it.

None of the boys spoke about difficulties in relating to male peer groups and they did not perceive themselves as being any different from other males their own age. As one explained it "I think all of my friends had a positive perspective of women and that they would take equality for granted."

The feminist mothers from the *Ms* article (and fathers in several of these relationships) seemed to attempt to demystify parental roles and encouraged their sons to see their mothers (and fathers) as real, fallible people. They saw mothering as "a learning process, rather than an interpretive and potentially critical act" (Everingham, 1994: 7).

There are as many styles of parenting as there are of feminism so it would be misleading to assume that all feminists adopt a similar style. However, parenting styles can be differentiated according to methods for securing the child's compliance. Parents may demand obedience, use reasoning, or accept non-compliance. Reasoning has been described as the most beneficial:

"instrumentally competent" children (those who are friendly, independent, and assertive with peers and compliantly nonintrusive with adults) are likely to have authoritative parents.— that is, parents who provide firm and articulately reasoned guidance for their children. Both authoritarian parents (those who fail to provide any rationale for their instructions) and permissive parents (those who fail to provide adequate guidance) have less instrumentally competent children. (Lamb, *et al.*, 1986: 152)

Everingham (1994) suggested that mothering should be understood as an interaction: “it is just as important to investigate what happens to the (m)other while nurturing as it is to investigate what happens to the child, since the affective sensations experienced by the (m)other while nurturing structure future patterns of interaction” (46). Thus parenting is not application of rules or even understanding what the rules are before the “game” begins. It is a negotiated relationship in which the parents seek what is best for the child in a rational and sensitive manner. What is right for one child or situation may not necessarily be right for another.

Our own sons felt that non-authoritarian processes had been beneficial to them. One son spoke explicitly about the advantages his parents gave him by providing a model of intelligent conversation:

I think it was a tremendous advantage to have educated parents, articulate parents who know how to hold a conversation.... Also important is the way we talked through arguments, not like angry but intellectual arguments... rationally debated.

He commented specifically about his mother’s role in teaching him how to articulate rational arguments and to think critically:

Rational argument and critical thinking — that was always the form that conversations have taken between Mom and I. It has never been a matter of “do this because you have to do it.” It may well be done at the end, but it always started out by her explaining why this is the best thing, not just “this is the best thing that you have to accept” and that got my rational views working.

The other mother felt that non-authoritarian parenting produced a questioning attitude in one of her sons which caused his teachers to think he was defiant. He would refuse to do assignments if he thought they were senseless and would do as he was told only if he saw good reason for it. This caused him trouble at school. His mother described it:

It (school) was just so straight and narrow that there wasn’t space for a kid who was a little different.... He felt he was protecting his principles and I kind of agreed with him. I mean when you teach a kid to be wary of unreasoned authority, this is what you get. I had to side with him, he was just living out to the nth degree the things that I had taught him. It would have been easier if he had been less principled about it, but that was the way he chose to do it and I had to go along with it.

The boy admitted that “(at school) I always had a problem with all the authority and I wouldn’t do what they’d tell me.” When asked about his

mother's involvement with his schooling he said "She always came in and went to the office for me because she got called in a whole bunch and she always fought for my side and I always appreciated that. She never took their side over mine."

Parents in pursuit of critical resistance who wish to protect their sons from being damaged by patriarchy are likely to use reasoned conversation in their interactions with their children. This approach is sometimes difficult in a world which does not always value reasoned fair responses and which is often controlled by unreasoned conventions. Our sons did not perceive themselves as disadvantaged by their upbringing and spoke positively about our parenting processes. They have learned to live in the society we have handed down to them and they seem to think that they are not unusual or in any way distinct from their friends because of it.

Another male advantage?

When we started this study we were unsure of the outcome. The best that we hoped for was that we would find out that our sons did not perceive us as having damaged them by being working feminist mothers. We did expect a few hurts and passing accusations and were not prepared for the wholehearted vote of confidence that we received.

Through this work we have been made aware of the complicated morass of interaction that makes up the parent-child relationship. However, we have been able to apply existing literature to our own experience, a process which was made easier when we accepted as discrete those issues associated the working (absent) mother and those associated with the feminist mother.

The working mother was rather easily absolved. In spite of folk wisdom to the contrary, there was no evidence in the literature which supported the notion that a working mother caused damage to her children. If anything, the literature suggested that rather than less outside work for mothers there should be increased parental input from fathers. Children of both genders who have working mothers have advantages in all areas including intellectual development, social adjustment and career opportunities. Our own sons saw nothing but advantages to having a working mother and planned to have working wives.

The effects of a feminist mother on her sons are less obvious. Although third wave feminists were able to identify their expectations for their children as "critical resisters" in a patriarchal world who would perhaps be isolated and punished for their stance, our sons do not perceive themselves as disadvantaged by their acceptance of feminist ideals. They could not remember any negative incidents associated with having a feminist mother, nor could they think of any way in which their awareness of feminism had worked against them. They were able to find specific aspects of their upbringing which valued in particular, their understanding of issues of equity and social justice. They suggested that it was useful to have an understanding of feminism but stopped short of saying that it had given them an advantage in forming relationships.

We realize the difficulties of building a theory on our own rather limited experiences and we remain puzzled by our own children's responses to feminism. They seemed almost nonchalant about an issue that we have always considered defining and life shaping. An issue that affected our lives in many ways seems to have coalesced into theirs without any ripples of resentment or emotional discomfort. We know that feminism is not an easy issue for girls to deal with. Could it be so simple for our boys? Perhaps part of the answer is a simplistic acknowledgment of the fact that patriarchy favours men and therefore, as men, they have a positive choice to make. They can choose patriarchy and enjoy the male advantage or they can choose to tolerate feminism and build strong relationships with women, take advantage of a strengthening trend toward equity and look forward to a wealthier future with a well employed partner. If this is the case, in an ultimate irony, it seems that feminist mothers may have handed their sons yet another male advantage. Let us hope that we have also raised them to be sensitive enough to use that advantage equitably.

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