

Living Feminism Through Mothering

The feminist mothers represented in this article believe that traditional, patriarchal mothering roles are hurtful to both women and children and are therefore trying to raise their daughters based on their understanding of feminism.¹ They try to give their daughters a sense of what it is to be a woman by providing them with some understanding of what oppression is, how it operates, and ways in which to deal with it. Daughters are encouraged to develop critical thinking and are taught by their mothers to recognize the influences of race, class, and gender on themselves and on others. Raising daughters based on a feminist awareness is political for these women as they are influencing their daughters to be critical of social structures, whether this be education, religion, media, or family. Feminist mothers want their daughters to develop to their full potential as human beings, to be strong and confident as children and as adults. Through consciously raising daughters to be critical of social structures and the roles defined for people, these feminist mothers are teaching their daughters the value of the personal being political.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first briefly outlines who these women are and what feminism means to them, the second explains how these women view mothering, and the third and final section explores how they ground their mothering in feminism by using specific examples.

Feminist mothers and feminism

The group of feminist mothers in this study do not represent all feminist mothers, nor do they represent particular “types” of mothers. Rather they represent themselves. The age range of these women is from 25 to 50 and they live in or around Winnipeg, Manitoba. They are all temporarily able-bodied,² birth mothers raising biological children, with two raising non-biological

children in addition to biological children. Half are raising children alone, while the other half are raising children in partnerships.³ Six mothers are single, two are lesbian, one is bisexual, eleven are heterosexual and I am uncertain of the sexuality of two of the women. Eleven women were born in Canada, two in the U.S.A, two in England and one in Africa.

The ethnic ancestry of this group is varied. One woman is African, one is Metis, and two are Jewish. Two women have Columbian/European ancestry, two are of Jewish/European decent and seven women have mixed European heritage. Four women identify themselves as poor, while the other twelve see themselves as middle-class.

All of these women identify themselves as feminist and insist that being feminist is who they are and not simply a role, theory, or ideological paradigm. Feminism is a world view which is ingrained in their bodies, minds, beliefs, and actions and is, therefore, implicit in everything they do, including their mothering practices.

Of course each woman has her own understanding and definition of feminism, yet a number of commonalities exist. These commonalities do not represent the entire understanding of feminism for these women, but provide a partial view of what feminism means to these women and how it relates to their mothering.

For all participants, being feminist entails having a feminist consciousness. It means consciously analyzing everyday events, and looking for the underlying assumptions in everything. Having a feminist consciousness for these women demands a recognition of what, where, when, why and how patriarchy works, as well its implications. Patriarchy, they believe, efficiently dis-empowers and dis-enfranchises children and women through systemic discrimination that supports and limits everyone to varying degrees—according to factors such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, social class, geography, and ability.⁴ Patriarchy uses social structures to limit women in ways that are harmful, give men power, and maintain a male-dominated hierarchy. Patriarchy does not acknowledge women's contributions in this world; it ignores her-story.

For these women, acknowledging and understanding patriarchy includes recognizing that the personal is political; that all personal experiences are linked to the larger world which is political in its makeup. They see that living in a patriarchal social environment influences and affects each one of us personally. They also consider the reverse to be true, that the political is personal. What we do as individuals has an affect on the larger world and its politics. These feminist mothers actively practice their beliefs.

Central to praxis, they argue, is choice. Choice entails the fundamental right to make personal decisions for themselves and about their lives, even when this includes little or no support from others. Choice is one of many paths to freedom from the social construction of gender and thus to self-determination. Making choices around issues of relationships, education, work, religion and, of course, reproduction, children and mothering are ways these women take

charge of their lives and create social change.

To be feminist includes, but is not limited to, analyzing and understanding patriarchy, inequality, and the social injustice as it pertains to women and children. It also entails knowing that by putting personal understandings, beliefs, and theories into practice, both individually and communally, acknowledges and acts on women's potential to be self-determined.

Mothering

Traditional patriarchal notions of mothering, according to the women in this study, are harmful to women and children. They claim that the most hurtful reality of mothering is the isolation and lack of support for mothers, both from people in general and from other feminists. Damage to mothers and children is brought about through the tactic of dividing different "types" of mothers into groups and then judging women according to their particular grouping. "Working mothers" are perceived as selfish and neglectful of their children's needs. "Stay-at-home mothers" are labelled dependent, boring, and suspect for not contributing to the family income. "Disabled mothers" are considered incapable, selfish, wrong, or invisible. "Welfare mothers" are seen as lazy, inept, and abusers of the "system." "Lesbian mothers" are viewed as incompetent, deviant, and "bad." What is additionally hurtful, according to these women, is that they themselves have labelled and judged other mothers and thus alienated themselves and other women. They know this undermines women and are working to eradicate this attitude in themselves and others.

Raising daughters in ways that duplicate patriarchal gender role stereotypes is also understood to be damaging to everyone. Not only do gender roles constrain the development of human beings, the roles themselves are destructive. Changing the socialization of children from conforming to patriarchal stereotypes to being autonomous human beings first, both liberates people and challenges the social order. Mothering for these women entails just this, allowing their daughters to be the people they are, regardless of social prescriptions according to sex and gender.

All of the women interviewed see their mothering as feminist because they value and encourage autonomy, self-determination and self-reliance in their daughters. Mothers respect and support the development and growth of children as individuals in their own right, and try to recognize the different strengths and weaknesses of all people.

One woman believes mothering is an important and powerful role in itself. To mother, in her words, "is to have a generation in one's hand." She believes that a mother's power to shape and influence the development of individuals, regardless of what's out there, means that mothers can contribute to the feminist struggle. Although all of the participants believe that the work of mothering is hard, undervalued and isolating, they also regard mothering to be the most significant work they can do for themselves, their children and their society.

Living feminism through mothering

In attempting to actively resist patriarchal ideals of mothering and notions of gender by rearing their daughters based on the feminist principle of the personal being political, these women believe they are living their feminism through their mothering. Of course, the particular ways of doing this varies from woman to woman.

One mother views all decisions around her mothering as feminist because she believes her political values go beyond her immediate family to touch others within the community. She makes conscious and deliberate choices around child care, schooling, immunization and the well-being of her daughters. The outcome of these decisions, she points out, does not occur within a void, but involves others in the community. This, she believes, influences community members by demonstrating alternative ways of mothering (choices) and that all people do not share the same values nor behave in exactly the same way. She views her mothering as politically effective because she provides a role model of mothering for her daughters and others that actively resist patriarchy.

Another mother views her choice to stay at home and raise her daughter as a way of defying the social institution of motherhood. By vocalizing her particular choice of staying at home, what she forgoes by choosing to stay at home, and how it relates to her politics, she believes challenges the assumptions people, including other feminists, hold about traditional female roles. Upon returning to the workforce in a job with a feminist organization, this woman finds herself battling discrimination from her feminist employers who do not recognize the value of her mother work while she was absent from the labour force. Because her work as a feminist mother is not validated, she finds herself both educating and politicizing those around her about her parenting choices. This, she argues, exemplifies living feminism through mothering.

Three mothers who have chosen to home-school their daughters believe that by doing so they are teaching their children and others about feminism. Each of these mothers spoke about the damage done to their particular daughters by the school system, whether through the violence of sexism, racism, or intolerance and discrimination based on other “differences.” These mothers show their daughters, and others, that they will not participate in a system which harms their children. Rather, they create alternative ways to educate their daughters in healthy environments which value children as unique individuals with particular needs. Home-schooling is therefore a feminist and political act for these women.

Mothers live their feminism through their parenting by helping their daughters achieve an understanding of how patriarchy oppresses them. Mothers show them how social structures are not fair to women and children. They consciously raise their daughters to be critical of these structures and the roles defined for people according to differences in gender, race, ability, sexuality, and class.

One mother shows her daughters ways in which the divorce law concretely

affects their lives to explain inequality. A second mother explains the unjust local and global division of economic resources amongst children, women, and men while shopping. Another sits with her daughters when they watch TV to expose sexist, racist, abelist, homophobic, and class biases which are presented as the norm.

Mothers live their feminism by actively demonstrating ways to resist patriarchy. They explain the links between the personal and the political in their children's lives and the power this has to bring about social change. For example, one mother supported her daughter who wanted to play soccer on the school team which was reserved only for boys. The daughter understood, from her mother's teachings, that not being allowed to play soccer was sexist, unjust, and had to be challenged. With support from her family, the daughter was able to affect change in the rules of the school district and play soccer on the school team. Furthermore, due to the work of this girl and her family, other girls are now playing on their own soccer teams in this community.

Another way to resist patriarchy is through making choices in our lives. The choices we make, these women point out, are however not without sacrifice as they are made within the confines of patriarchal society. Mothers exemplify this by sharing with their children choices they have made and acknowledge both the costs and benefits of these. For example, the choice to raise children has meant going on social assistance for three women. A number of mothers know that the cost of choosing to stay at home is not having a pension and an income. Other mothers recognize the lack of time they spend with their daughters as the cost of working outside the home. The price for another mother who, due to financial constraints can not home-school, is to place her daughter in an educational program which is far from ideal. The consequence of making the choice of raising children for two mothers means putting their own education on hold. Children are not blamed for the costs of mothering, but rather are shown how there are constraints placed on people's lives due to patriarchy.

In addition to acknowledging the cost and benefits of choice, feminist mothers ensure that choice is a value they pass onto their daughters by encouraging them to make choices for themselves. At times these choices may not be ones mothers believe to be "best" for their daughters, yet they allow them the independence and freedom to learn the realities of making personal choices. For example, one mother supported her daughter's wish to go to a religious school for a time until it did not satisfy the daughter's expectations or needs.

Being an advocate for children in their choices also means providing children with the skills required to live with choices which may be difficult. One mother supports her daughter's education in fashion design knowing full well that her daughter's designs do not fit the mould of the patriarchal fashion world. She and her daughter are both prepared for the hardships they will incur for not conforming to the dominant standard.

Living feminism through mothering is illustrated in the support mothers

give their daughters to develop into human beings when they may not fit the stereotypical gender roles prescribed by patriarchy. One mother speaks of how she tries to empower her two daughters to be who they want to be. She does this by encouraging them to do whatever they want and be whoever they are, with the only restriction being the safety of her daughters and others. For this mother, living feminism through mothering is, in her own words, “helping someone to become strong, and to fulfill themselves. It’s creation, it’s development, it’s assisting someone in growth and becoming.”

Conclusion

As has been illustrated above, these women live their feminism through their mothering in various ways. Some women challenge the patriarchal role of mother by critiquing the institution of motherhood outright and by overtly mothering in ways other than those prescribed by patriarchy. Other women use the “cover of mother” to subversively teach their children to challenge the injustices of patriarchy. In either case, these mothers live their feminism through their mothering by illustrating to their daughters, and others, the injustice of and need to eradicate patriarchy.

All of these mothers acknowledge the immense power they have in the lives of their children. They counsel them to “be awake”; to know and be critical of the patriarchal system we live in. They choose to consciously educate and guide their daughters in ways that resist patriarchy by showing them how the personal is political and by encouraging them to be critical thinkers. Through the act of supporting their daughters to be who they want to be and in teaching them that they need not conform to damaging stereotypical gender roles, these mothers help foster positive self-esteem and self-confidence in their daughters. Raising empowered daughters, these feminist mothers argue, is one of the many steps required to bring about feminist social change.

¹These 16 self-identified feminist mothers are living in southern Manitoba and are involved in research for my Interdisciplinary (Education, Sociology, Women’s Studies) Ph.D. at the University of Manitoba.

²I use the term temporarily-able bodied to draw attention to the reality that most people become “disabled,” whether through old age, through accident, or other life experiences.

³A number of these women are also mothers of sons, and argue that they try to use their feminism in raising all of their children, regardless of sex/gender.

⁴The term patriarchy was used by both myself and the participants, and included discussion of its meaning.