

Juggling the Roles

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Une féministe mariée discute l'influence qu'une décennie de changements à fait sur les vies des femmes qui parviennent difficilement à mener de front une profession et une famille.

I am a married feminist with two children and a full-time demanding career. The past decade has set the stage for women like me. In September 1970 I got a full-time job; in November 1970 I got married. At that time I was not a feminist. When the department store where I had a credit card sent me a letter asking my hus-

bility for half the mortgage if I assumed responsibility for the other half. I blithely agreed.

In 1972 I became pregnant. At last I was arriving at that stage that young women supposedly dream of—husband, home and baby, spending days making patchwork quilts and bran muffins, per-

working in affirmative action. Many of my friends and colleagues have gone through the same process. We did not have a plan, we did not have role models, we did not know what would work. It seemed that we concentrated our energies upon the crises or delights of the moment, talked to each other at length and coped



band to sign a form promising to be responsible for my debts, I dutifully turned it over to him. He not only refused to sign it but responded by informing them that I had always been responsible for my own debts and would continue to be so as far as he was concerned. They sent both of us new credit cards.

My husband and I had both been working full time at the same college. When we announced our marriage, one of the vice presidents wrote us a letter wishing us all the best and informing us that because of the college's anti-nepotism policy, one of us would not be rehired. Before the vice president had answered our question, 'Which one?', legislation was passed in Ontario making it illegal to fire a spouse under anti-nepotism policies if he or she had been a full-time employee prior to the marriage.

In 1971 we bought a house that was beyond our financial means; my husband agreed to the purchase with the understanding that he would assume responsi-

bility for half the mortgage if I assumed responsibility for the other half. I blithely agreed. In 1972 I became pregnant. At last I was arriving at that stage that young women supposedly dream of—husband, home and baby, spending days making patchwork quilts and bran muffins, per- haps returning to work part-time in a few years. However, a significant event for working women occurred in the Seventies—maternity leave legislation came into effect on January 1, 1973 in Ontario, allowing a full-time working woman the right to request twelve weeks leave of absence to have a baby. Her employer was obliged to grant the leave and take her back into the same job at the same pay at the end of the twelve-week period. The chair of my department suggested I reconsider my plans to resign my job. My husband reminded me of my half of the mortgage. The legislation took effect January 1; I applied for maternity leave on January 2. My daughter was born February 10 and I was back at work in April.

Now I have two children, my job has turned into a career and my husband still insists that I pay for half the family expenses. I have become a feminist and tried to apply this belief system to my life by developing curriculum and teaching women's studies, doing research and

as well as we could.

How did we manage this transition from well-educated, sophisticated, independent working women in their twenties to experientially broadened, emotionally deepened and sometimes overwrought working women/wives/mothers in our thirties?

The library is full of books on how to be a super-woman: she cooks eggs benedict for the family breakfast while reading the business section of the morning paper, whisks off to work in a Ports blouse and three-piece suit where she makes policy decisions around the boardroom table, lunches with business associates and rushes home to prepare a dinner party for her husband's clients. All the while she maintains 'meaningful' relationships with her children, in-laws, neighbours and pets! One book even explains how to combine polishing your sterling silver with a current-events discussion with your husband.

Sterling silver! Discussions about the

business section of the morning paper! That was not the reality of my life, nor that of my friends. We spent our lunch hours rushing to do the weekly shopping. Our meaningful conversations with husbands focussed upon who had really been up all night with the baby, and whether or not we should pick up their shirts just because they had a late meeting.

In order to come up with a picture of how many young families of the Seventies had been ordering their lives into this new family and work structure, I made up a short questionnaire and sent it out to a few friends, neighbours, colleagues and friends of friends. My sample was small and biased because they were personal contacts, but the response was overwhelming. The answers were thoughtful, articulate and in my opinion, quite profound. Here's a brief summary of what they had to say.

Generally, these women are realists.

married women. Their salary allows their husbands to return to school, change jobs or start their own business. They also like the friends they have at work, professional relationships that are completely separate from their families. They don't demonstrate a 'straining at the bit' to reach the top in their jobs—they would not sacrifice their family relationships for that. They don't resent being unable to work overtime, although they recognize that their own continuing education and professional development must be neglected or postponed. They have no romantic notions about their relationship with their husbands and recognize that the strain, the conflict, the shortcomings exist—as they would in a more traditional marriage. The resentment does come through, but even that has a note of ironic humour.

'Good grief! After seventeen years of

parents. In addition, the professionally trained staff and mixing with other children offer stimulation and challenge that could never be experienced in the home. The disadvantages were the morning deadlines, long days and travel, high costs, restrictive hours, especially for women who work different shifts, and no arrangements for caring for a sick child.

I asked questions about the effect of dual roles on the children. Respondents pointed out that the children of working mothers have more expected of them, are provided with a good role model (especially daughters, who are 'career minded' at a young age), are self-reliant, confident, mature, independent and adjust easily to new situations. The boys from these families often assume responsibility for household tasks as early as age six, learn to sew on their own buttons, are resourceful and helpful and cooperative



This doesn't come through in a pragmatic, logical way, as much as in a deep understanding of what life is about for women at this time in our society. They articulate clearly the disadvantage of being pioneers in changing the role and concept of wife/mother. Most of their husbands came to the marriage expecting (deep down), a nurturing, passive mother-figure—but they are doing their best to contribute towards shared responsibilities in the home. They all speak of the guilt and the longing to spend more time with their children—'the little faces of one's children will always be first, expect that and let it be.' But they also mention the guilt and frustration of stay-at-home mothers.

They like earning money; they take pride in being able to contribute significantly to the family's standard of living. These are professional women, most of whom have husbands making a very good salary, but this backs up the premise that most people work for money—even

marriage, I still haven't learned to work out these conflicts. Deep down my husband has yearnings for the dependent, submissive stereotype that his mother was, even though his conscious wish is for an independent wife with a pay cheque.'

For many women, the major reward their working had for the family was what it did for them as a person—being intellectually stimulated and having a life of their own created a closer bond between them, their man and their children.

Day care has played a significant role in the lives of these women and most of them have used public day care centres. They attribute these facilities with fostering independence, adaptability and confidence in their child, and giving them temporary freedom from the overwhelming responsibility of rearing a child. The day care centre provides security, a schedule and a perspective for the children that doesn't come with 24-hour-a-day

in the family. The children have little difficulty getting along with other children and adults, and show respect for each other's privacy and feelings. They tend not to form stereotyped notions of the 'division of labour' in the household and of their own potential and are acutely aware of stereotyping. They recognize as 'facts of life' that women work outside the home, that mother is a separate and distinct person, that children and parents each go off to their 'place of business.' These children recognize their mother's need for space, both personally and professionally, and as they get older, take an interest in their mother's work, considering it partly 'theirs.' One 12-year-old boy noted 'how awful it would be to have a mother who waited all day for you to come home and if you wanted to play with friends how guilty you would feel.' He appreciated the freedom he had because he didn't have a mother 'breathing down his neck.' Occasionally the children are embarrassed when they

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go to a picnic with a deli salad when other kids have homemade cookies. However, this was the only negative effect on the child noted by the respondents.

What role does the husband play in all of this? The question on care of the children when they were sick or had school holidays showed that in some cases the husband was available only in extreme emergencies, while others took their turns staying home or taking the child to work with them. About half of the women indicated one or the other of these; the other half implied that this problem was solely their responsibility.

The main ways in which the woman's career put a strain on her relationship with her husband was the lack of time left for him; the conflict with his wishes (or demands) created by the demands of the job; his 'dislike and disapproval' (interesting choice of words) the woman's

to sit down and compare schedules and make sure that everything was looked after and they had time with each other; having a cleaning woman and a dishwasher; having a full-time babysitter. However, the unresolved problem areas were great. Most of the women believe they cannot solve these problems and will have to live with what they have, that the relationship and both personalities exist independently of the woman's career. However, the stress, tension and anger that come from trying to be responsible for everything; the feeling that one is not tender, caring or patient enough; the feelings of guilt; the exhaustion and lack of time noted by almost everyone all add up to a heavy burden on the woman.

The qualities necessary for success for a woman embarking on a combined family and career were noted as strength, tenacity and energy; the woman must be organized, self-directed, determined, de-

on to the following suggestions: marry a liberated man; don't take any crap from any family member, you're not the family servant; bury your 'Super Mom' T-shirt; forego Rive Gauche and Creeds clothes for a cleaning woman and live-in help. Most women emphasized strongly the need to have a genuine commitment from your man to share the homemaking and to you as a career person. The one woman who has had little conflict with the shared roles is married to a man who believes fundamentally in equality for women—and that clearly does make it easier. One woman warned against embarking on both at once and suggested that the career be established before family begins—being financially equal and independent provides the basis for the rest. All of these women emphasize the importance of sharing ideas, child care, problems and tears with your friends. Communication with other women friends in the same position



job itself. A few of the women reported that their husbands did few or no household chores, but did all the maintenance work. About half of the women reported that their husbands shared in household chores and child care.

One commented that her increasing economic independence and her achievement in the same general area as his had upset the power relations and resulted in ego problems for him. Another believes that her husband is jealous of her successes. Some women commented that although their husbands shared in household chores they felt responsible for organizing the tasks. Similarly, difficult children became 'hers.' One persistent problem was the attitude on the part of some men that their career took precedence over anything or anyone—the woman's career, the children or the home life.

Some of the ways in which the strains on the relationship were worked out were: booking time together once a week

cisive, adaptable and willing to compromise. She must believe in the value of her work and the value of her family; be willing to give up a lot of the social fluff; be willing to seek support when needed; have a clear definition of her goals and learn to communicate them with diplomacy and tact. And one of the key qualities mentioned was a sense of humour.

Interestingly enough, the one characteristic seen by many women as leading to failure was selfishness or an inflated sense of self-importance. I interpret this to mean that one's perception of oneself on the job, as a homemaker or as a wife and mother must be as a member of a team; you are not the 'queen pin' and no longer have a unique function. Other characteristics mentioned that would lead to failure were disorganization, tunnel vision, perfectionism, lack of courage, too much guilt and inability to compromise.

The advice to young women about to embark on a life of career and family combined started with 'don't!' and went

plays a significant role in the lives of most of these women. Once again, sisterhood is powerful.

We have come a long way since 1970 (when I thought my husband should assume responsibility for my debts and that my education and job had been stimulating but . . .). We had no role models and our husbands had no role models, yet our employers adapted quickly to pregnant employees and maternity leaves and sometimes even babies in the offices. And our sons grew up believing daddies make dinner and take you to day care and our daughters played house by planning to go to an important meeting at work.

I'd like to do some more research and writing on this subject. If you are interested, please write to me, care of CWS/CF, and I'll include your experience as a pioneer of the Seventies and a role model for the Eighties.

Many thanks to all those who responded to my questionnaire.