

## Dissenting Voices

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# Parenting from the Margins

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## **Parenting from the Margins**

Jessica Muller

### **Think Again!**

The category of woman is often seen as monolithic in feminism. The nuclear family is seen as an enormous obstacle to women's liberation (Martin, 2011). According to many feminist viewpoints, motherhood is simply a duty forced upon women by patriarchal structures. Mothers are thought to lose all sense of identity and self. Feminism suggests that women reject marriage and the nuclear family model. Women would be better off refraining from having children. Women with children already should stop defending nuclear motherhood because "it is the nuclear family in which patriarchy reproduces itself" (Martin).

The idea of mothering (or parenting for the sake of being inclusive) from the margins is derived from the understanding that the experiences of women are not monolithic. For example, white women are mothers; white babies are seen as wanted. Child rearing as any other identity is seen as less than. Racial minorities fight to be seen as anything other than "irresponsible breeders" (Martin). Rarely does one encounter a positive reaction as a pregnant teenager, black woman, LGBT person, or poor person. People who identify with one or more of these identities must fight every day to be seen

as legitimate parents. Feminism should reconsider having a child in a marginal group and fighting this daily fight is a challenge to the patriarchy. Motherhood and parenting can be a source for activism and change both by challenging societal norms of who can successfully raise children, and by educating and empowering children to rethink current structures dictating family norms.

*Who better than a feminist to raise a child? Children of feminists will be far less tolerant of the current hierarchy and social inequities. A parenting feminist is actively creating a better world each day.*

While giving a presentation about the representation of motherhood and feminism, I asked a group of people to build a list of qualities that define a good mother, or parent.

### Qualities That Make a Good Parent

Loving

Patient

Accepting

Supportive

Creative

Nurturing

Involved

Stable

Flexible

Committed

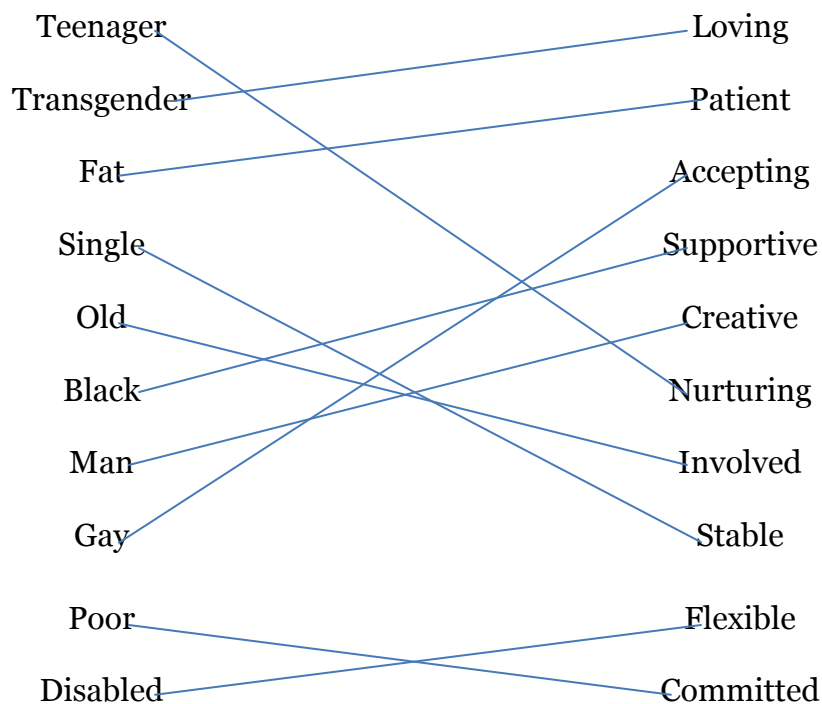
Then I *challenged* the group. Using a list of identifiers that commonly evoke discrimination from others, we made comparisons between the identifiers and the

qualities that were decided make a good parent. Is it possible to both possess an identity discriminated against or be a part of a group stereotyped as bad parents, and still be a good parent according to the parenting standards we created? Do the qualities that make a good parent have any barriers to minority identities? For instance, is there a cause specific relationship between being black and neglectful (the common stereotype) and is there anything preventing a black mother from being an involved parent? This exercise forced us to look past stereotypes and recognize that anyone can possess the qualities of a good parent. However, there are structural issues that make it more challenging for marginalized individuals to meet these parenting expectations. If a poor, racially oppressed mother must work three jobs to feed her children, does she have the freedom to be an involved parent? Working three jobs doesn't distract from her desire to be an involved parent, it simply prevents it.

## Can a person possess both qualities?

### Identity

### Emotional Agency



People possess a variety of qualities. Our daily experiences tell us so. By encountering real people, or possibly possessing a marginalized identity ourselves, we can say that people break down stereotypes every day. The issue is, people in the identity list, and other groups not listed, face discrimination for having children based on the assumption that they will not be good parents. The diagram above shows that the

qualities deemed most important for parents to possess can be held by a diverse group of people. So what exactly is the problem with poor, young or disabled people parenting? What is at the root of the stigma?

I believe it is an issue of stability. Society views these disenfranchised groups as unable to provide stable families or as ill-equipped to parent without assistance.



Wait a minute! Back up! Has anyone ever done it alone?

What if all parents had sufficient **SUPPORT** and **COMMUNITY** available to them?

Would a young single parent continue to be constructed as devastating to society?

Is it possible to live in a world that truly provides the *freedom* to decide whether or not to parent? While feminists celebrate choice and the ability to follow unconventional paths to motherhood, feminists ignore the ideological binary of legitimate choice-making mothers and ‘bad’ choice-making mothers. Mothers who break the social narratives of timing are often viewed as ‘bad’ choice-makers. However, would these choices to parent against social norms continue to be viewed as bad with a stronger societal foundation of parental support in place?

What would it look like if all parents had access to...

- Safe Housing
- Food
- Healthcare
- Education



- Childcare
- Transportation
- Supportive work environment
- Emotional support system

These necessities are **NOT** handouts. Basic programs for childhood well-being would begin building a strong foundation of education, preventative health care, and nourishing food, causing children to have a greater chance of positively contributing to society as adults. By providing basic parenting resources as prevention, the cost of safety nets and crisis programs would be significantly reduced. The common example of welfare as a financial drain on society would decrease if more jobs with a living wage and supportive work environment existed. Single parents or households with two working adults could afford to remain employed if childcare were subsidized. The more adults in the workforce, the stronger the economy becomes for the entire country. How many more parents could provide *stability*, *attention*, *patience* and *creativity* when they're not worried about where to live next month or whether they can afford to purchase baby formula with their next paycheck?

### **Look Around You**

We must **BUILD** and **SUSTAIN** communities. We must **THANK** the people around us that contribute and contribute to those around us. A community is similar to an eco-system; we must put back in what we take from it. There are no plants or animals that function on their own, only those that have a role within the system. Communities are an organism that requires effort, consistency, and flexibility. The outcome benefits every person that is a part of it.

I have thanked the people in *my* community. Without these individuals, I would not have an education, a safe place to live, child care, flexible employment or an emotional support system. Without these people, my children would not be growing into lovely, empathetic, well rounded people. Every day I work to give back to my community and build stability for others. By putting my efforts into my community, I know that my children will have a safe and productive environment to live in.

### **What Can YOU Do?**

**RECOGNIZE** that good parents are found in many places and in diverse packages. Tell them they are doing a good job and you appreciate the hard work it takes to raise children into ethical people. These children are the leaders of the future, and it is important to teach them strong ethics and values. Pay attention to the way fruitful communities function. Realize your role in the give and take actions of your community. How do you contribute and what more could you be doing? What resources in your community do you use? Are there more resources that would benefit your community and how can you make these a reality?

**RALLY** for programs and initiatives that provide support and stability for families. Access to food, safe housing, health care and quality child care should not be a privilege but a human right. Providing everyone with an equal and strong foundation leads to a strong and stable community and economy for everyone. The well-being of children determines their future as adults and ultimately their future is **EVERYONE'S** future.



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## Further Readings

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