

The rise of the ‘disobedient mother’: towards a feminist vision of motherhood

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According to some authors, the real experience of motherhood often means having to juggle your personal life, your relationship and work. Having to keep this fact quiet can make women feel like they are failing as mothers.

“97% devoted. 3% self-centred. 0 complaints. 100% mother”. This slogan – chosen by a major department store chain for its latest Mother’s Day advertising campaign in Spain – sparked widespread indignation, leading many on social media to call for a boycott of the Spanish retail company. The campaign, as many feminists denounced on Twitter, reproduced the “usual patriarchal stereotypes about motherhood”, those accurately described by Catalan writer and journalist – and mother – Esther Vivas in her book, *Mamá desobediente. Una mirada feminista a la maternidad* (*Disobedient Mum. A Feminist Perspective on Motherhood*), published by Capitán Swing in 2019.

Vivas challenges the patriarchal ideal of the self-sacrificing mother. “There is a somewhat romanticised, idealised conception of motherhood. According to the traditional, patriarchal view, there are only two types of mother: the devoted, self-sacrificing mother and the bad mother,” says the author, in an interview with *Equal Times*.

“But the real experience of motherhood often means having to juggle your personal life, your relationship and your career. This side is kept quiet, which makes us feel like we are failing as mothers. The fact is, as mothers, we don’t do what we want, we do what we can. Real motherhood means exhaustion, contradiction and ambivalence,” she concludes.

The ideal of the self-sacrificing mother has been coming under fire for some time now. *Regretting Motherhood*, by Orna Donath (Reservoir Books, 2016), became a milestone by speaking out about the fact that there are women, no matter how much they love their children, who regret becoming mothers. In 2014, in Spain, Laura Baena opened the [Club de Malas Madres](#) (Bad Mothers’ Club), which now has over 55,000 followers on Twitter. Shattering that impossible ideal helps the real women who have to juggle work, motherhood and all the other aspects of their lives, day after day, in the midst of compromise and negotiations that never lead to the ideal solution.

Motherhood, it is true, is one of the main instruments traditionally used to dominate and domesticate women, which goes some way towards explaining “the rejection it faces within some feminist circles: there is a biosocial aspect to being a mother, and feminism is uncomfortable with that biological component,” explains Vivas. “An anti-maternal and anti-reproductive discourse emerged during the second wave of feminism, in the 1970s. But now there is a generation, mine, that has not been confronted with motherhood as the only route possible and that has a less prejudiced view of it,” she adds. Other authors, such as lawyer and writer Marta Busquets speak unreservedly about ‘maternophobia’ within the feminist movement, linking it to the lack of attention feminism gives to the issue of [‘obstetric violence’](#), for example.

Collectivising care

Verónica Gago, academic, activist within the Not One Woman Less (*Ni Una Menos*) movement and mother, summarises the dilemma as follows: “No woman can do it alone; it would be enough to drive anyone crazy, because the pressure to be a self-sacrificing mother is coupled with the decimation of public childcare facilities and radically altered family structures.”

The challenge for the feminist movement lies, according to Gago, in “thinking about motherhood from a community and interdependency perspective, as the solution to care cannot be resolved privately or monetarily”. In other words, we need to look for collective solutions, rather than every individual woman being forced to solve the problem within their own home, by paying another woman to take on the tasks she cannot handle.

“De-individualising motherhood”, to quote Vivas, means that mothers should no longer be expected to shoulder all the responsibility, that childcare needs to be collectivised, and men also need to be more involved.

Because, although things have changed substantially in recent years, women in countries like Spain continue to shoulder 68 per cent of the total time dedicated to unpaid care work, according to the figures for 2018 from the International Labour Organization (ILO). In the case of Argentina, women dedicate twice as much time to unpaid domestic work than men, according to the National Statistics and Censuses Institute (INEC).

The figures vary according to the country, but women invariably dedicate much more time to care work, including, of course, looking after their children.

The controversy around paternity leave

What can be done to involve men more in child rearing and care? In Europe, paternity leave has been extended in recent years; the most striking case being Sweden, where mothers and fathers are entitled to 480 days between them. In Spain, the plan is to progressively increase it – it has already gone from two to five weeks – until reaching the 16 weeks available to women, and making it non-transferable as well as equal.

The amount of maternity leave granted has not, however, changed since the 1980s, and is not enough to allow women to exclusively breastfeed their children for at least the first six months, as recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO). That is why many in the feminist movement are arguing that priority should be given to increasing the leave granted to mothers, rather than men, as a four-month-old baby’s need for both parents is not the same.

“Equal and non-transferable maternity and paternity leave is proposed as a way of addressing the gender inequality in the labour market, but the whole premise behind the proposal is flawed. Motherhood is still being seen as a problem, when the problem is the world of work, which is not compatible with care and life,” says Vivas.

The measure raises other issues: it is based, as Vivas points out, on the stereotype of the heterosexual family, and also fails to consider single-parent families, 85 per cent of which are [headed by women](#). The writer argues that this measure will do nothing to address the [inequalities in the labour market](#), which go far beyond maternity leave.

Also, the fact is that co-responsibility for care cannot be ensured by laws alone, not even in Nordic countries. “A lot of the women I have spoken to in Scandinavian countries are annoyed because the men take parental leave but don’t take on the parenting and care responsibilities,” explains Italian

author and feminist Silvia Federici, during a press conference in Buenos Aires at the end of 2018.

“The risk is that, by taking an abstract approach to equality, we will once again end up penalising women and making their work invisible,” she added. That is, men and women are not equal when it comes to maternity: some bodies are able to gestate and breastfeed, others are not. For the Italian activist, Federici, feminism should not reject that fact, but value the work that women do and that the capitalist patriarchy ‘invisibilises’. That is why, she concludes, feminism has to be anti-capitalist: “Because this society is not sustainable; it is only able to sustain itself through violence and plunder.”

“It is society that should adapt to breastfeeding, and not the contrary,” says Vivas in her book. Similarly, society needs to adapt to the fact that human beings require care – when we are children, when we are old, when we are sick – rather than our care needs having to be adapted to the rigidities and imperatives of the labour market. As the writer and journalist concludes: “A different motherhood requires a different society.”

This article has been translated from Spanish.

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