

## CHILDCARE.

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Fear and envy of the female are carved deep into the collective male unconscious, and have their expression in the social subjugation inflicted by men on women over the centuries of western civilisation. The great significance that should logically attach to the greatest of all human functions - birthing - is absent from our society, as a result of this, and all traditional female work - particularly the rearing of children - is traditionally regarded as second class. It ought to have been the business of early feminism to challenge this view, to assert the primacy and vital-ness and grandeur of the female function, but it didn't.

When feminism first arose it accepted the male-imposed values that put any kind of paid work before the birthing, feeding and nurturing of children, and saw the liberation of women as consisting of separating them from their biological ties to these functions. Breasts and wombs were seen as no more than tiresome physical appendages preventing women from competing on equal terms with the beings that didn't have these things and were therefore innately more fortunate and to be envied - men. Women were encouraged to view their biology in entirely negative terms, as preventing them from doing the important things that men could do all the time unhindered. The way forward was seen as a matter of separating women from the degradations of their femaleness- menstruation, pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, so that they might advance to higher things. The suggestion that femaleness might of itself be equal to maleness was never made. Female liberation became the liberation from femaleness into something best described as para-maleness: the values, ethics, priorities and goals of the male-created world were accepted without question, and women were encouraged to assess their freedom, value, awareness by how completely they had succeeded in pretending to be men.

Para-maleness became the goal, and para-maleness is essentially all we have attained. We have the right of entry into the male world. We have the right to rise high in our chosen professions, to be paid equally for an equal days work. But only if we behave like men. And men don't menstruate. Men don't get pregnant. Men don't give birth. Men don't breastfeed their babies. If we want to get on and be accepted in this male oriented world we have to become a para-male and pretend we don't do these things either. This isn't equality, this isn't near-equality. It's just a different kind of subjugation. If we doubt this consider contemporary social attitudes towards the fulltime working woman, compared with the fulltime, home bound mother of children. The status of the one has risen immeasurably, and is still rising. The status of the other is still as undervalued, as patronised and marginalised and trivialised as it has ever been.

In that sense, the woman of today is just as exploited as her grandmother, her choices, though different are hardly less limited. While she can maintain her illusion of para-maleness, she is permitted her freedom. Menstruation must never be admitted to, or be allowed to keep her from work, pregnancy sickness must never impinge on her efficiency or stamina to cope with the nine to five schedule. But once her child is

born, once there is that small dependent object that needs its mother's body, its mother's breasts, the illusion of para-maleness can no longer be maintained, so something has to give. In our society that something is naturally the woman herself.

She faces a stark choice: either abandon her para-maleness, embrace her female identity and be content to be a mother and let her other identities go to hell for the next ten years or longer, or maintain the fiction of her para-maleness by denying her motherhood much as she denied her other female functions, pay some other woman to take on her mothering role and return to her work. Choice like this is really no choice at all, it is a choice that should not have to be made, and would not have to be made if women were accepted into the working environment as women and not para-males. The truth is that babies derive huge mental and physical benefits from being breastfed, this can only be done by the mother. Pre-school children need the comfort and security of a loving one to one relationship, this is best provided by their mother. As women we are programmed for a close and constant tie with our babies, if we cannot maintain that in the early years both we and our babies suffer. These undeniable facts of femaleness have been used by the reactionary who want to keep women locked in their 'traditional' and powerless roles, and derided by the advocates of para-maleness, all of whom worked to the unquestioned assumption A. that this biological fact was some kind of badge of female unworthiness, and B. that it automatically disqualified any mothering woman from doing anything but mothering. But these are male assumptions, why should we accept them?

Firstly, I see nothing unworthy in my total indispensable necessity to my baby. A child's exclusive need of its mother in its early years should be viewed as a source of female pride, the confirmation of our place in the centre of creation, the place that male fear and jealousy has so long sought to deny us. Secondly, a mothering woman is only disqualified from other employment if society is so designed that it becomes impossible for her to fulfil both functions at once. Our society is so designed today, but many societies have not been, and there is no reason why ours should not change. At the moment a mothering woman can only continue in outside work by abdicating her motherhood for large parts of the day, and the only solution proposed by all political parties to the vexed issue of childcare versus paid outside work is to advocate greater access to this surrogate parenting for more women. But this is obviously a solution designed for the benefit of the employers and industry and not for the women and children it purports to assist. Many women don't want to leave their young babies for eight hours at a stretch with a woman who is paid to deliver their needs. The situation is forced upon them because employment can't be found on any other terms. If real female equality is to replace para-maleness then this is the first and most important thing that has to change. A woman must be able - if she chooses - to fit her work around her mothering and not be forced to fit her mothering around her work. Her hours and place of work should be flexible enough to take account of the varying and unpredictable nature of her other job as mother. A breastfeeding woman should be able to take her baby to her outside work, and feed at times that suit her. If she prefers to work at home after having a child then she should have the right to do so if the circumstances of the job permit. Above all she should be respected as much for performing her irreplaceable job as mother to a member of the next generation as she is for doing any additional job. When we have these things we will know what equality really is and everyone, male and female, may be the richer for it