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The curse of the perfect mother – adapted from Japantoday.com 8 May 2012

Women once again need to start talking frankly to each other about what it means to be a woman. Contrary to popular opinion, it does not mean being a mother. If we don't have an open discussion, the dream of gender equality will remain exactly that – a dream.

The gains of the feminist revolution that empowered women to make independent, personal choices about the kinds of lives they want to lead are being quietly eroded on several fronts. The “return to nature” movement and the “green” movement, propose that being a mother is the essence of womanhood. Meanwhile, many child-rearing experts are telling women that anything less than total dedication to their child's physical and emotional needs means that they are not being good mothers. The child reigns supreme. The mother obediently serves.

The current unstable economic times make balancing work and motherhood ever more challenging so a retreat to home and cradle is more alluring. These factors create a perfect storm of circumstances that are pressuring women to abandon their quest for gender equality and instead become almost competitive at being perfect mothers.

We are told that babies must be breast-fed, on demand. Co-sleeping and baby wearing are advised. The perfect mother must hold herself totally responsible for what happens to her child. It's not just about tending to the baby's needs. It is also about producing the happiest, most fully developed and intelligent child possible.

The persuasive impact of these ideas is dangerous because it makes women who don't want to breast-feed, or who don't want to share their bed with an infant or devote every moment to its total welfare, feel somehow guilty and inadequate.

Women fall prey to this subtle pressure for various reasons. In part, it's a generational backlash, as women of today see how little has changed despite the efforts of those before them. Many were reared by women of feminist principle, who didn't necessarily breast-feed, and who had pursued career ambitions. Now, they question whether the battle for women's independence was worth it. There's still a glass ceiling and wage parity remains a dream. So, the idea that a woman's “natural” role is that of mother and homemaker can be tempting.

If motherhood is truly what a woman wants, then it's absolutely the right thing for her to do. What deeply worries me, however, is the way women are unwittingly being pressured towards the view that "woman" equals "mother" without considering its full implications.

Those same pressures can have an equally damaging reverse effect. In the western part of Germany, for example, many young women are abandoning motherhood altogether. This choice makes a lot of sense given the pressures they face: The bar for motherhood is being set incredibly high, they're expected to sacrifice their careers in the process, and, considering the divorce rate, it's quite possible that, after a few years, they will find themselves struggling as single mothers. So who can blame them for avoiding these pressures and risks?

Women need to see what's going on before they're duped into accepting dogma as truth. I'm a mother of three. I chose to have children not because I believed I was fulfilling my natural, biological destiny, but because it was something I made up my own mind to do. By today's standards, I was probably only an average mother. I certainly wasn't burdened with expectations of perfection, and I managed to have a full life and career and be a mother.

I want today's women to make their own paths in life, free to make personal choices without feeling that they have to fit into a particular mold. Every woman should be able to choose whether to be a mother, and every mother should be able to choose whether to breast-feed, and whether to continue working. If women don't start asserting the right to choose for themselves, I can foresee a time when they won't be given the choice at all.

Questions:

1. Do you think there is too much pressure on mothers to be "perfect? Why?
2. Is it possible to be a good mother and have a good career?
3. Do you understand the expression "glass ceiling"? Is there a glass ceiling for women in business in Japan? Why?
4. Do you think it's better for mothers to stay at home and raise children, rather than have careers? Why? Why not?
5. The article says that in parts of Germany many women are choosing to not have children. Is this also happening in Japan?
6. What can we do to make things easier for working mothers?

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