

Motherhood is not a prison, but is a struggle

Is modern motherhood a threat to the advancement of women?

If one reads the essay published last weekend in the Wall Street Journal by feminist Erica Jong, author of the 1970s bestseller "Fear of Flying," one would believe so.

In it, Ms. Jong refers to modern parenting with terms such as "a prison," "a backlash against women's freedom," and "the ultimate bondage" and chides the "orgy of motherphilia" we have had to "endure" for the last 20 years.

It is unfortunate that a leading member of the second wave of feminists continues to try to frame women's advancement against their roles within the family. This approach harms women and children, as well as our husbands and family partners.

Although women of my generation are deeply indebted to second-wave feminists for establishing many legal protections for women, especially in the workplace, the fact remains that no movement, feminist or otherwise, has succeeded in fully enabling women to effortlessly become fully integrated human beings



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in modern society. Many of today's women strive simultaneously to be attentive mothers, loving wives and partners, and successful, productive members of the work force, but it is not always easy.

Families need help

Ms. Jong is correct that there are days when we feel "stressed out" or "run ... ragged." However, the solution to these collisions of time and energy is not found in being less attentive, responsive parents. Rather, the answer is to identify and create societal solutions that support children and families so that women and men are not overextended.

For example, families need more high-quality, affordable childcare. We need better parental leave policies and flextime arrangements. We need incomes that allow families to have stay-at-home

Online

For a link to Erica Jong's essay, see this commentary at StatesmanJournal.com/Opinion.

parents for those who value that structure. We need more support for breastfeeding and access to other quick, nutritious affordable foods for our children.

Solutions aren't easy

The fact is that it truly does "take a village" to raise a child well. However, the transient nature of the American workforce has impacted families' abilities to rely on extended family members as resources for care and support of the next generation. Thus, American families must rely on their larger communities for support, including schools, churches, workplaces and community centers.

For example, American families would benefit from the creation of high-quality schools that serve as social centers — not simply educating our nation's children at a level unsurpassed in the world, but also by serving nutritious food,

creating opportunities for physical exercise, providing space and structure for extracurricular activities after school such as music, sports, and social clubs, and facilitating the provision of preventative medical, dental, optometrist care, and counseling on site when needed.

Of course, creating societal solutions such as social center schools is not easy. They require dedication, collaboration, resources and, of course, participation in the political process.

Ms. Jong suggests that modern parents are too exhausted and overworked to engage in such endeavors. However, as the recent rise of "mama grizzlies" suggests, motherhood can serve as a galvanizing political force. Regardless of whether one agrees or disagrees with the political ideals of this brand of women politicians, the recent election cycle makes clear that one ignores the ursine threat at one's own folly.

Role models needed

Even for those women among us with no interest in overt political activism, we know that

motherhood is a tremendously powerful source of generating political and societal values. Whether volunteering in our children's classrooms, guiding our sons and daughters in good sportsmanship at their games, or taking our families to a church or spiritual center to help them to develop moral values and spiritual awareness, we are impacting the political and social world around us.

Indeed, just by striving to be women who are fully integrated human beings, we are modeling for the next generation choices that convey to children that they are loved, valued and respected by women with rich and varied lives, and that they, in turn, can themselves become or marry or work with women like their mothers.

Is having that kind of loving and attentive and responsive relationship with one's children "a prison" for women? If so, you can lock me up and throw away the key.

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