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PINK AND BLUE WORLD Gender Stereotypes and Their Consequences
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Experience and Stereotypes
Social Contexts of Motherhood

It is very important to remind women that they always have more options they can choose from.

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The Decision to Have a Child

Procreation of and raising children is such an important part of human life that it is unsurprisingly surrounded by various myths, magical practices, prejudices and scientific truths and regulated by legal provisions. The biological fact that babies are "made" through female bodies has had different implications for the social status of women in different social formations and cultures.

Societal ideas about the "proper" motherhood have changed over the course of history. These ideas are formed "eternal truths" handed down for generations as well as by latest "scientific" findings.

Motherhood is related to many important decisions: when and how many children one should have, how to reconcile work and personal interests with childcare, how to materially and psychologically support the family, and the like. Civilizational changes in the structure of society bring about new issues that cannot be adequately addressed by old recipes. In this contribution we try to map some stereotypical ideas that unnecessarily complicate the already difficult practice of mothering.

Research and statistical data indicate that in Slovakia many children are still born "unplanned". But political, economic and social changes of the present day are evident also in this sphere: the marriage age is increasing together with the childbearing age esp. in women with higher education. Also the availability of contraception has contributed to responsible parenting.

But stereotypes have a long life, and society still exerts strong pressure on women of a certain age to "hurry up" because "the biological clock is ticking". The idea that to be a mother is the only woman's value is very tenacious. It is one of the most important stereotypes that significantly impact personal lives of concrete girls and women.

Another thing is the fulfillment of the intention to have a child. A stereotype has it that children should be brought to this world only in the heterosexual marriage. This idea has enormous consequences: people enter into a marriage because a baby is "on its way" or because a woman "must marry" when she wants to have child. An increasing number of

infertile couples and the development of new technologies of assisted reproduction bring about new issues, possibilities, new complications, but also new joys.

Adoption is also a possibility to fulfill one's desire to have children. But adoption is also burdened with prejudices about the ethnicity, sex and age of a child, and adoption itself.

The Woman and Child "in Practice"

What does it mean for the present-day woman to have a child?

Her life will radically change. Her day will be structured according to the needs of her baby – and it will be so for many years.

For some time she will have to leave her job. This fact means different things for different women – according to the nature of their work or profession.

For some time her income will be different than before – in most cases it will be lower or even none. This is a very important question related to the willingness of highly qualified women with high income to have a child. But it is also a question of her relationship with her partner who can easily get the impression that when she doesn't earn money she should "obey". Here we can fully see the influence of another stereotype – the idea that care (in this case childcare) and housework are not work. They are unpaid therefore they have no value. If a woman does them it is because she loves her child and her partner, and motherly love, as we know, is endlessly giving and not asking to get anything in return.

Motherhood changes the emotional life of a woman. This is a very complicated and treacherous side of motherhood. The ideal is that a mother who gives birth to a healthy child experiences pure, untainted happiness. But ideals rarely work in reality. Extreme expectations can cause disappointment but also remorse, that a woman is not a good enough mother and that she hasn't done all she should have.

The Childbirth

The childbirth and its course is a separate issue. In Slovakia almost all women give birth in a hospital. This has its advantages in cases of unexpected complications, but it also has an important side effect: the hospital creates the impression that childbirth is something pathological. But childbirth is not an illness, and in most cases its course is physiological. The stereotypical idea that an obstetrician is the only competent person to assist in childbirth is slowly fading away. It was proven that a friendly, homelike setting, the presence of close people and the care of a midwife are for a mother much more humane than the hospital setting resembling the surgery. And the environment in which a woman gives birth does matter.

If some complications occur during labor, and when for instance the caesarian section must be executed, mothers often suffer from remorse that they were unable to give birth in the "proper way". At the time when the woman experiences important psychological and physiological changes can the prejudice that she "failed" have a very negative impact on her life. Correct information in this respect can, as in any other sphere, contribute to the sound experience of childbirth.

Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding is an activity surrounded with surprisingly many prejudices. For instance, in the 19th century in wealthy families, milk of the biological mother was not regarded as suitable

for the baby; therefore families would hire a wet nurse. In the 1970s there was a widespread idea that the best thing for the baby is commercially produced infant formulas. Twenty years later, the media were filled with firm statements that mother's milk was totally irreplaceable in infant nutrition. So opinions change but one thing hasn't: everybody feels they have the right to dictate to mothers what to do and how to do it. But this is a very sensitive thing: the mother can breastfeed or she cannot; she may want to do it or she can choose some other options. She has the right to make her decision and that her opinion will be respected by others. Her wellbeing is more important than the question of whether she is breastfeeding or not.

The Self-sacrificing Mother

Another dangerous stereotype is the myth about a totally self-sacrificing, unquestionably loving mother to whom her own life ceased to exist. Even women who have been brought up in this idea since their early childhood cannot live in accordance with it. It results in frustrations, disappointment, anger directed at one's own child or partner, the whole world...Mothers are human beings too, mature persons with their own ideas about themselves, their lives, about what they want and what they don't. It is an intolerable simplification – if not blackmail – to expect that “maternal love” will take care of everything, will resolve everything. For society as a whole and for the people close to the mother it is very convenient to rely on the panacea called “maternal love”. However, to all concerned people it is more beneficial and humane when childcare is included to the daily life of the family and to the social context so that mothers could also develop their personalities.

The Pseudoproblem of the “Working Mother”

The hierarchically structured patriarchal society has, by its nature, the tendency to control its members. An efficient instrument for controlling – and threatening – women is societal pressure exerted on mothers to “choose” between motherhood and personal development, professional ambitions. This dilemma is a double bind: firstly, it puts women at a disadvantage (no matter how untenable in the current way of life the idea that the woman will “naturally”, exclusively and for many ears take care of her child or children, while her partner will at best be her “helper”, is), and secondly this dilemma is misleading. It poses the question imperatively and it also provides an imperative answer to it. It is a woman who ought to – has to – decide whether she wants a child or whether she wants to pursue her career or be financially independent. It would be more just – and from a long-term perspective also better and more appropriate to ask how people in the current world can balance their desire to have children with their individual plans and interests. If we put it this way we would see that children are often declared to be an irreplaceable value and the future of our society, but the structure of society does not facilitate cultivating this value.

The Value of the Mother

Another dangerous stereotype is the myth that society values and respects mothers, in all respects supports them, even celebrates them on some days of the year. But it suffices to look around to see the reality. Roads, streets, underpasses, bridges, public transportation, entrances to buildings – all these are almost unsurpassable obstacles for mothers with children and strollers. Childcare is considered to be such a commonplace female activity that we seldom regard it as work – and society clearly expresses it in the amount of maternal and parental benefits. And at the labor market, mothers with children are at a clear disadvantage compared to men.

However, this situation is not immutable. Unifying Europe is gradually building equal opportunity legislation and gender mainstreaming at all decision-making levels. The aim of

gender mainstreaming is gender equity. The analysis of gender relations shows that the traditional women's role puts women in a special life situation when they want to return to paid work after they had to leave their job due to unpaid maternal leave. Measures supporting women returning to paid work are concrete steps to ensure equality of opportunities between women and men. On the other hand we should also consider how to change general conditions that disadvantage women. Flexible of working hours, material safeguards for parents and benefits related to employing women returning to work after maternal leave – these are concrete measures to achieve gender equity.

In general it can be said that for special measures for mothers in certain life situations will be needed until gender relations in society are organized hierarchically. These measures must concern also men – fathers who, like mothers, can find themselves in a disadvantaged position.

The Fruits of Maternal Work

For every woman, the notion of a self-sacrificing mother is a dangerous trap. In compliance with societal expectations she is fully devoting herself to her “maternal duties”. Even the term “maternal duties” clearly conveys the fact that in our society motherhood easily loses its joy, feelings of pleasure from the parent-child interaction. Stereotypical expectations put on mothers are unrealizable. Nobody has endless energy and patience. Mother then suffer from remorse, they chastise themselves when things don't work ideally. But motherhood is not a duty and it is not a one-sided pressure of the mother on the child to be one way or the other. The myth about “upbringing” is harmful and nonproductive. It often means those five minutes of disciplining when one remembers that her child's schoolbag is a mess. But the real upbringing is about coexistence of grownups and children and their mutual influence.

But to get back to traditional “maternal duties”: After years of intensely caring for her family woman naturally feels she has done something great and that she would deserve appreciation, gratitude and love of other people. In reality, an old woman usually experiences bitter disappointment. For years she was creating the good “family atmosphere” and now she doesn't matter any more. She never developed her potential because she was one-sidedly focusing on the comfort of others, and now, after all those year, others find her backwards and uninteresting. The images produced by advertising show dignified grey sitting in a comfortable armchair with a delicate smile on their lipstick-covered lips at best embody the desire of many women who with an increasing fatigue move in the vicious cycle of helping their grown-up children, caring for elderly parents or relatives and managing their own lives.

The Dispossessed Female Body

Society dauntlessly praises the holy mission of motherhood. At the time, the ideal of a girlishly slim woman with baby-like complexion is being more and more aggressively promoted. The stereotypical assertion about the high value of motherhood contradicts the current esthetic ideal of the female body. This contradiction has a devastating psychological impact on women and girls: most women don't like their own body. Naomi Wolf called this the “beauty myth”.

Over the course of centuries, our culture has created two images of women: Eve and Mary. Mary is a pure virgin who gave birth to the Messiah. The ancestral mother Eve is a sinful woman who seduced Adam and caused that the first people were expelled from Eden. Mary is asexual, self-sacrificing, fully devoting herself to her divine son. Eve is the symbol of (sinful) sensuality; she succumbed to the serpent's temptation and she also tempted Adam to break the

God's order – since then, as a punishment, all women give birth in pain. These two female models still influence stereotypical view about how women and girls should behave. But also clichés about female sexuality, motherhood, and about which woman “deserves” respect or not.

The school can do much to create conditions to help girls to simply become real people with their own opinions, individual characteristics, desires and hopes.